

The Purpose of Vipassana

Although we are quite selfish we are incapable of helping ourselves, and although we are not so altruistic we are very capable of helping others. Of course not in terms of leading them to complete liberation or buddhahood but to some extent we can very effectively help others. Whenever we are presented with other people's problems, because that problem is not mine, there is some space for us to see the problem for what it is, so we can give good advice, we can find the solution. When the same problem strikes us we find ourselves incapable of helping ourselves and unable to step back. This brings the problem so close to us that the problem becomes "mine" with no space to see what really is.

Nowadays we find many people involved in "altruistic jobs", spending all day helping others and then coming back home, shutting the door behind and throwing them selves on the bed crying, as they feel so lonely and desperate. We do have this type of paradox where we have people who spend lots of time "helping others" but not being able of helping themselves. Therefore we need a method that can teach us how to help ourselves, which does not mean at all being self-focused. If we can help others - and that is true, but we cannot help ourselves, then we do have a problem, and we should begin to question why so.

In the practice of vipassana the very first thing that one learns is to create that space, so what happens to oneself whether pleasant, or unpleasant, is seen objectively. So one is not emotionally involved. That is the very basic benefit that the practice of mindfulness awareness brings to the person.

The actual purpose of vipassana, of course, is to realize, understand, see, the so called, "three marks of life": suffering, impermanence, and selflessness. Suffering here means the unsatisfactory nature of our existence, which is due to the fact that everything is impermanent and devoid of self. Here impermanence means instability, while no self means lack of controller. What is unsatisfactory, and worthless, (as Buddha put it), is our worldly happiness. The pleasure that creates our happiness is unsatisfactory and worthless because it is ephemeral, short lived, unstable and unsubstantial. In the practice of dharma the understanding of pleasure having that characteristic is extremely important because craving and clinging is what takes the mind away from the practice.

When the intelligent person, as Buddha said, sees pleasure for what it is, impermanent transient, conditioned, with no one behind, not a self, an agent that has the power to create it, or the power to keep it for as long as one wishes, that person sees the pleasure/happiness unsatisfactory "worthless". This of course doesn't mean that pleasure and happiness are denied. Simply, by seeing what really is, the person dwells dispassionately and detached.

On what basis does one sees these three marks of life? This is done on the basis of contemplating the Four Objects of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, feeling (sensation), mind, and dharmas (or mental objects).

How does one contemplate these so called "dharmas": body, feelings etc.?

One does it with the very skillful method of "bare attention".

In the practice of vipassana what we call "mindfulness" is actually "naked" or "bare attentiveness". This so called "bare attention" has the function to observe what is taking place. It allows things (the experience) to speak for themselves without interruption by final verdict. It is synonymous with "fullness". When for example, we let anger be anger - without generating the strong wish not to be angry, while anger is taking place - we will see what anger is trying to tell us: "I am just passing-by". The only way to see, feel this truth is with the mindfulness of bare attention, silently observing with no conceptual interference.

In the very moment during which something like anger is taking place, the wish to get rid of it, or the not wanting to be angry, nourishes the anger as much as wanting to be angry. We haven't understood yet that anger wants to go as much as we do. Actually, even more! This is understood only when we observe it silently while it is taking place without interrupting itand of course without engaging either!

When one looks at the body, feelings, consciousness and mental objects with the observing power of mindfulness, in the manner above explained, everything will appear as having that nature; transient, short lived, ephemeral and therefore unworthy and unsatisfactory. This eventually will cause the person to generate an attitude of dispassionateness and detachment towards life, which is the very basic condition for the practice of dharma, as well as for a more peaceful life.

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