Vipassanā Meditation: An Introduction to Insight Meditation Practice

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 42:36

Welcome to Treasure Mountain, the podcast that inspires and guides us to find the treasure within human experience. I'm your host, Sol Hanna.

In some recent episodes of Treasure Mountain Podcast, we've heard about the importance of samatha practice—that is, meditation with the purpose of developing stillness and tranquility of mind. But what about vipassanā, insight meditation? Some of my listeners have contacted me and asked me this very question. The vipassanā meditation movement has had a huge impact upon meditation practice both East and West, and has shaped modern understandings of what meditation is about and for. So what is vipassanā meditation? What is its heritage? What is its basis within Buddhism, and how does it work?

To answer these questions and more, we have as our guest today Patrick Kearney. Patrick has practiced mindfulness meditation since 1977. At that time, there was little or no Buddhist meditation training available in Australia, so he spent years traveling in Asia and the USA, working with teachers from different Buddhist traditions to learn the craft of meditation practice. Most of his training has been in the insight meditation lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, which included several years as a Buddhist monk. His main teachers were Sayadaw U Pandita and John Hale. He's also trained in the Diamond Sangha lineage of Zen, where his teachers have been Robert Aitken Roshi and Paul Maloney Roshi.

Patrick has been a full-time teacher of mindfulness meditation for over twenty years. He conducts residential and online retreats, workshops, and seminars. He has studied early Buddhism at postgraduate levels and has a particular interest in the original teachings of the Buddha before the invention of Buddhism. This allows him to bring the radical insights of the Buddha to our contemporary situation. He sees meditation as a physical practice that reconnects us with the felt world of our senses, allowing us to live our lives directly rather than through the cling wrap of our habitual thinking.

I'm really pleased that Patrick has taken the time to join us on the podcast today, and I want to thank all our listeners for joining us for this episode of Treasure Mountain Podcast as we seek for the treasure within human experience.

Welcome to Treasure Mountain, Patrick. How are you today?

I'm well, thank you.

I'm really pleased that you've taken the time to join us and share your experience and help our listeners

understand more about vipassanā meditation. A great place for us to start is at the beginning. Could you define for us what is meant by vipassanā meditation, or what we sometimes call insight meditation?

When the Buddha spoke about meditation, one of the basic dyads he used was serenity and insight—samatha and vipassanā. This is partly about purpose. Why does one undertake a meditation practice? Is the purpose to develop serenity, or is the purpose to develop insight? These are not mutually exclusive, obviously, and in fact you can't develop insight without a foundation of serenity. But it does indicate a basic purpose and therefore a basic direction.

In one very interesting discourse, the Buddha talks about four kinds of people. He says some people develop internal serenity of mind but not a higher understanding of insight into dhamma—in other words, insight. Some people develop insight but not internal serenity of mind. Some people develop neither, and some people develop both. Clearly, what he wants is for people to develop both. So insight and serenity are qualities that exist in any practice, but you can have some practices that are more oriented towards serenity and some practices that are more oriented towards insight.

Just a few weeks back, we had Peter Harvey from the Samatha Trust as a guest, and he was talking about samatha meditation. How would you say that vipassanā meditation is distinct from samatha meditation?

The insight tradition that I'm familiar with is that of Mahasi Sayadaw, and the way he structures the practice is to lead the student to perceive change. This is anicca saññā, the perception of impermanence or of change, because for the Buddha this is the gateway into insight.

My understanding of serenity is that one absorbs into a single meditation object. Let's say, for example, breathing—a classic meditation object. If I'm using breathing for serenity purposes, all I want to do is absorb into the experience of breathing. If I'm practicing for insight, I want to do that, and I also want to see the changing characteristics of the breathing. This will change my relationship to the meditation object.

For example, I'll be interested in how the experience of breathing changes, and this can be right down to the very elemental level. Is the in-breath longer than the out-breath, or was the out-breath longer than the in-breath? Can I see the beginning and the end of the in-breath? Can I see the beginning and the end of the out-breath?

Is there a gap? What does the mind do during the gap? If I'm distracted, am I more likely to be distracted on the inhalation or the exhalation? And so on.

So you notice in that relationship with the meditation object, it tends to be more precise. There's a bias towards precision, but it's very interested in seeing the differences. My understanding of serenity is that if I'm following the breathing simply to absorb in it, I'm not looking for the differences between in-breath and out-breath. I'm not looking for the differences between the breathing as it presents now and as it presents five minutes later. But if I'm practicing for insight, I am interested in all of these differences.

Now, is it just when you do insight meditation, is it just using the breath? Or for instance, I've heard you can do like sweeping through the body. Are there any other bases upon which insight meditation might be developed?

Yes, I talk about breathing because it's so common. I call it the generic meditation object. But anything at all—this is a fundamental principle of Satipaṭṭhāna, which is what we translate as insight meditation or mindfulness meditation. The thing about Satipaṭṭhāna as an approach to practice is that one of its characteristics is that it is not object specific.

Let's go back to breathing. If you're doing ānāpānasati, mindfulness of in and out breathing, it is object specific. If you're not following the breathing, you're not doing it. But if you're doing Satipaṭṭhāna, the meditation object can be any aspect of body or mind. It's not limited. So anything at all.

In the case of sweeping the body, that's a way of using body sensation in such a way that you see change. That's what you're doing. The whole thing is deliberately designed that way. Mahasi Sayadaw, when he talks about what insight meditation is, sometimes says insight meditation is to be directly aware of whatever arises in the six senses as it arises. So, everything. And sometimes he says it's to be directly aware of the five aggregates associated with clinging, which in the classical Theravāda sense is another way of saying everything—but here, specifically, anything that we identify with. So again, anything.

Can I stop you just for a very brief moment to clarify a point there? Some of our listeners might not have heard of this idea of the six senses. Of course, in the Western education system, we learn about five. So what are those, and what in brief are the five aggregates of clinging as well?

I'll start with the six senses. The Buddha, what he's interested in is experience—the nature of human experience. In European philosophical terms, you could call him a radical empiricist, or you could call him a phenomenologist. He's interested only in experience, which means he's interested in what comes through the senses. And for him, the senses are sensitivities—sensitivity to particular forms of data.

If you consider the body, there are two very small parts of the body that are sensitive to light. We call them the eyes. They register light, but they don't register sound, for example. The two parts of the body that register sound are sensitive to sound, and so on and so forth. So the senses are sensitivities that pick up particular forms of data.

Mind is a sensitivity. It's sensitive to particular forms of data—for example, thoughts, perceptions, fantasies, desires, aversions, and so on. So mind is a sense, a sensitivity, along with the physical five. Hence six senses. And the sixth sense is not something spooky. It's just the fact that mind is a sensitivity. That's how it operates.

Yeah, subjectively, that's what we experience—five external senses and the mind.

Yes. And all that the Buddha is interested in is what we subjectively experience. He's not interested in

anything else. That's one of the reasons why he rejects theories of self, because he says, well, you don't actually directly experience a self.

So he just won't go there. He talks about any given experience as not self, and therefore says to forget about self. He's not really saying there isn't a self—he's just not joining the debate. He's saying, look, if there is one, you can't experience it, so let's forget about it.

That's the same reason why there's no creator God in Buddhism. It's not because he says there isn't one. He says that if there's a creator God, and if we are part of creation, then by our very nature we cannot step out of creation, and so we cannot directly experience a creator God. So let's not bother even talking about it. It's beside the point—absolutely beside the point. He's only interested in the nature of experience. He's a radical empiricist. He refuses to make any exceptions.

So if you use the six senses as your meditation object, it's code for anything at all in human experience.

And then we have the five aggregates—this is the pañca upādāna khandha. The pañca khandha are the five aggregates; the pañca upādāna khandha are the five aggregates appropriated. Upādāna is normally translated as clinging, so these are the five aggregates associated with clinging. But what it really means is that the five aggregates are five categories of experience—categories that we appropriate to say, "This is me."

What does the term "aggregates" really mean?

The word is khandha, which has a variety of meanings. It can mean a great mass of things, a collection, a pile. Stephen Batchelor translates it as "bundle" because he links it with the Buddha's imagery of fire.

Let's say you're on the beach and you build a sandcastle. The sandcastle is a single thing, but it's an aggregate—a pile of sand. The use of the term aggregate suggests that what's holding it all together isn't all that strong. The sandcastle is sitting on a beach, so anything that can be categorized as sand is also part of the aggregate. The term can be applied in different ways, but in all cases it's a collection of particular types of experience.

So there are five aggregates, five categories of experience that we use as raw materials to construct a self. These are body, feeling, perception, saṅkhāras (constructions or formations), and awareness. These are the raw materials we use to construct a self, like we use sand to construct a sandcastle.

Is there emphasis in Vipassana on observing these khandhas?

Yes. As I said, Mahasi himself, in his popular writings, sometimes says that what you do is track the six senses, and sometimes he says what you do is track the five aggregates associated with clinging. In both cases, he's opening things out. And in both cases, he's interested in how we construct experience—including how we construct the self.

For the Buddha, self is a construction project, but one that's never completed—rather like an Australian builder. I'm being cynical here because we've had a lot of builders at our place. It's an ongoing construction project.

What happens in insight meditation is that you see yourself constructing yourself. When you see that, you cannot believe in the independent existence of the self, because here you are, busily constructing it. And if you're busy constructing it and it's causing you pain, you think, hmm, maybe I could stop doing this.

So you're drawing a connection between the construction of self and dukkha—suffering, one of the other universal characteristics?

That's right.

Often we don't see that connection. So part of what insight meditation is trying to do is to help us see it. And that's actually in the first truth. When the Buddha is defining dukkha, he says, "In summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha."

The purpose of the practice is to take you into change—this emphasis on the way things change—and take you into dukkha, and therefore take you into not-self. The three characteristics are all bound up with each other. In fact, strictly speaking, according to the tradition, insight meditation begins when the meditation object becomes one or more of the three characteristics. Until then, you're really doing a preliminary serenity practice, but one that's aimed at uncovering the three characteristics.

What are the expected long-term effects of regular Vipassanā practice? If one is practicing every single day for a number of months or years, how might one change as a result?

Well, one thing is you would develop more serenity, because as you practice the discipline of the practice, there is a calming down effect that takes place. But what you would expect is to have a greater understanding of how your own mind works, and therefore a greater understanding about how other people's minds work, because everybody's minds work in the same way. From that, you would expect to see greater empathy, and you would expect to see greater equanimity in one's ordinary life. If it's working, that's what you should see.

But it takes time for these things to emerge. And they can emerge, and it can take more time for them to be noticed. It's one of the paradoxes of the meditation practice. Because meditation is a natural activity, it can be difficult to see a cause and effect relationship between what's happening in your life and the meditation practice.

Let's say I take up meditation to handle stress, which is a very common motivation. Let's say that before I take up meditation, I've had another practice to handle stress. And this practice involves a certain form of alcohol kept in the fridge. I come home from work, I bring out the bottle, I pour a glass, I drink the glass, and I feel better. I drink another glass and I feel even better. There's a clear cause and effect

relationship—I know why I'm feeling better. It's because I'm consuming this substance, and it's clear because it's artificial.

But let's say I instead take up meditation practice. It's a natural process. And what can happen—it's not at all unusual—is that someone takes up meditation because they feel really bad. Then after some time, maybe a few months, they feel, "You know, I used to feel bad, but I feel okay now. So why am I keeping up the meditation practice?" So they drop it. They continue to feel good. And then three months later, they're thinking, "You know, I'm not feeling so good anymore. I wonder why." And then maybe the penny drops. But there's no obvious cause and effect relationship because it's natural. And also perhaps it's happening over a longer period of time.

It takes time. That's the other thing. If you're looking for a quick fix, don't bother with meditation.

I've noticed this even in myself—your motivation to practice is often stronger when there's a bit of suffering. Then you practice and you feel better. And then all of a sudden, you just kind of let go of the practice a little bit. It's something that's pretty common.

What are some of the challenges that beginners might face if they're starting a Vipassanā meditation on a regular basis? What kind of problems might they encounter, and what are some ways they might overcome them?

A common set of problems have to do with the body. Posture is important. In fact, the four postures—moving, standing, sitting, lying down—are one of the sections of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in which the Buddha hands out the meditation objects. So posture is really important in the broad sense. This goes back to the Indian yoga tradition. In Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras, Patañjali says regarding āsana, posture: "Posture is steady and comfortable." If you're going to settle the mind, you need to settle the body.

And if you're going to settle the body, you need to be either still, or if you are moving, moving pretty rhythmically—and to be able to do that over a period of time. So the posture must be steady in that sense, but it also needs to be comfortable. Because if you're constantly bothered by physical pain and restlessness and distress, it's going to be much harder.

Now, that is a big barrier in today's world. Most people are carrying a huge amount of physical tension, so you need to work through that. Usually, for a lot of people, some kind of body work is recommended—yoga or some such modality—and that helps a great deal.

The next barrier is the restlessness of the mind and the disturbance of the emotions. This varies from person to person hugely, but it takes a great deal of patience. You need to be able to settle awareness and then simply watch your dramas unfold. And again, this brings us back to the body, because the stability and the frame that you have is body. So if you can settle into body in any given posture at all—any posture—over a period of time, and then just watch and feel what happens, then you gradually work your way through these more gross levels of disturbance.

Question: You mentioned that it's pretty common, especially for beginners, to have emotional disturbance. I imagine you might be referring to strong craving arising, or perhaps traumatic or emotional experiences from the past coming up in meditation. Because we identify with them, they feel very close to us, and when they arise in the mind, we feel very involved with them—they have strong emotions attached. Are you saying that one way to work through this is to come back to awareness of the body?

Well, here we come to the details of the method, the craft. Different methods come out of different lineages, and they have different answers, different approaches to this.

In Mahasi's approach, first of all he talks about what in Pali he calls the *mūla ārammaṇa*, the root object. His English-speaking Burmese disciples translated that as "primary object." I prefer to translate it as "grounding object." You need something you can settle awareness into—a home base. You spend, particularly in the early stages, a lot of time settling into this grounding object, being distracted, coming back, being distracted, coming back, being distracted, coming back, endlessly. The same as in serenity practice.

Then Mahasi talks about what could be called the secondary object. At some point we're distracted—in other words, the awareness is taken from where we want it to be, the grounding object, and it's as it were kidnapped, and we find ourselves somewhere else. Usually this is in thinking, or physical pain, or emotional disturbance. As soon as we realize that this has happened, that becomes the meditation object. The physical sensation, the physical pain, the emotional disturbance, the thought becomes the meditation object. Be directly aware, and then come back to the grounding object.

So instead of a simple "come back endlessly to the grounding object"—which is my understanding of how serenity would work—once you start to get into it, you start to make your distractions your meditation object. This is where the craft of the practice comes in, because that can be very challenging and very difficult. How do you do that? How do you make your thought a meditation object? How do you make your emotion a meditation object? This is not immediately obvious. And this is where training with a teacher is important, where learning the craft becomes very important, and where it can become quite counterintuitive.

Question: Obviously there's more to the method than we can cover in a short interview like this. If someone listening was interested in trying out insight meditation, what advice would you offer them for getting started?

Find someone who teaches insight meditation—that's the obvious one. There are a fair few people around, and there are different methods, different lineages. That's a good place to start. But I would say basically: be interested in the fact of change. This is what I tell all my students. Get interested in change.

And if you want change handed to you on a plate, get interested in distraction. Become interested in the fact that you get distracted. As opposed to, say, feeling upset or averse to the fact that you are distracted,

you actually start to say, "Okay, what's going on here with this distraction?"

If when you realize you're distracted, you get upset about it and criticize yourself, or criticize the method, and then hurtle back to the grounding object as soon as you can—basically, you've just wasted a perfectly good distraction. What you've just been shown is change. And you've also, in all probability, been shown not-self, because did you choose that distraction, or did it just arise because of conditions?

So you get to know, you're directly aware—or in Mahasi's language, you note the distraction. It becomes the meditation object, only briefly, particularly in the beginning, only briefly, and then back to the grounding object. But you don't just dismiss the distractions. You recognize it, you accept it, you're aware of it, and then you go back to the grounding object.

And I also wanted to ask, as a meditation teacher yourself, apart from what you just mentioned, how would you start out teaching beginners? What are the main points you would hit upon in, say, a beginner's meditation course, just as an overview?

Whenever I teach a retreat—mostly I teach retreats—I start off with playing around with awareness itself, getting a sense of what awareness is. And then I move on to mindfulness. Now, mindfulness I define as the felt continuity of awareness.

Usually I start off with this exercise. I say, "Okay, we're going to start with a very technical meditation practice. We're going to hold our hands together and feel our hands." Question: Can you feel your hands? Answer: Yes. That's awareness. Question: Are you making any particular effort to feel your hands? Answer, for most people: No. It's just happening. That's awareness. It's just happening. Something is present to you, and it's just happening.

And then we do exactly the same exercise, but for three or four or five minutes. Then I ask them, "Were there any gaps in your awareness of your hands over that period of time?" And almost invariably, the answer is yes. "Was there any effort involved in maintaining continuity of awareness?" Most people say yes.

So why is it that I'm aware of the touch of my hands naturally and without any effort, but if I have to maintain that awareness over a period of time, suddenly it becomes difficult? Well, that's the difference between awareness and mindfulness. Mindfulness is maintaining continuity of awareness over a period of time. And to do that, the first thing we have to notice is the discontinuity—to recognize that my awareness actually isn't continuous at all. There are always gaps.

That must be very hard to pick up on.

Well, it is. When I do that exercise, I used to do a version where I'd say, "Okay, feel the touch of your hands for three minutes. And as soon as you recognize that you've lost the touch of your hands, raise your hand." Now, we're doing this in a room, so this is, you know, the demand to be publicly humiliated. And what is

really interesting is that usually the first people to raise their hands are the most experienced meditators.

Why? Because they're sensitive to the discontinuity of awareness.

Because their mindfulness is actually better. They've been working on it. They've been practicing. So it's quite counterintuitive in some ways. One of the things that makes insight meditation tricky is that it is, on occasion, completely counterintuitive. To be distracted but aware of your distraction is a sign of progress.

I'd like to go off on a bit of a different tangent and ask you about mindfulness, since that's what we're discussing. Mindfulness is the common feature regardless of what type of meditation you're teaching—if it has any integrity at all, mindfulness is going to be a key element. It's the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. I've asked recent guests about their impressions and perceptions of what's going on in the West now, because there's a lot of talk about mindfulness. While it originated within Buddhist meditation practice, it's now been stripped of its original context. There are many different mindfulness-based courses available, and of course apps on your phone meant to train mindfulness. What's your impression of this whole explosion of mindfulness in society? What are the positives and negatives, and is it missing anything?

Certainly it's missing the Buddha's understanding of mindfulness—what he called sati, in Sanskrit smriti. When mindfulness became fashionable with Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction, or MBSR, he used mindfulness as a kind of catch-all word to describe the meditation practice he was presenting. He said this in his writings. So he used the term mindfulness rather vaguely, and that vagueness has stuck. The Buddha is very precise in the way he uses his terms, so from a traditional Buddhist perspective, the secular mindfulness movement is hopelessly confused and vague about the actual meanings of the terms they use.

But on the other hand, so what? Mindfulness-based stress reduction and other modalities—they work. They relieve suffering. And they speak to contemporary secular audiences in ways those audiences can appreciate. So who cares?

The main thing is meditation. This is what's radical, what is possibly revolutionary for our culture. In Western culture, we've never developed, as part of normal everyday life, a sense of what we call meditation and the craft and skill involved in that. In the Christian tradition, it's quite spotty. You do find it, but often the yogis—the people who are practicing—are low status and frequently oppressed, because they come up with ideas and practices disapproved of by the guardians of orthodoxy. In the Indian traditions, however, the yogis are the authority. So the Indians developed a very sophisticated understanding of what happens when one meditates or contemplates.

What's happening today is that perhaps for the first time, Western culture is starting to recognize that there is such a thing as what the Buddhists call meditation, that it is a skill, a craft. You can learn it. You can get good at it. And if you do that, there are significant benefits. This is revolutionary. So the fact that

the secular approaches are a bit spotty around the edges when it comes to technicalities is neither here nor there. It's wonderful that people are interested at all.

And of course, so many people who get started with these secular varieties of mindfulness—I meet them when they turn up at a retreat because they want to go deeper.

That's a good point, actually. That's a very good point. I think that was the original intent of people like Jon Kabat-Zinn—to make it more accessible outside of a religious context, in a secular setting, so that more people would practice. From a Buddhist point of view, it's not really a big deal. We don't need to insist upon a specifically religious context in order to do mindfulness. For us, there isn't that duality. It's simply a matter of developing the mind in this way. It's very useful and beneficial.

I really appreciate that you've taken the time to come on the show and talk to us about Vipassana meditation. I feel like we've just scratched the surface. There seems like there's a lot more to explore. Would you recommend that if someone wants to start out with meditation, should they go straight on to a retreat? Or would you say it's better to do a weekly course for a few weeks and then perhaps later down the track do a retreat? What are your thoughts on that?

Probably better to join a meditation group and just dip into it. You want a group where there are some experienced people who can help you out, give you the basics, and then start to play with it and check it out rather than dive immediately into a retreat. And then when you're ready, you can consider a retreat.

But one thing I would say is that sometimes what people will do if they want to attend their first retreat, they'll pick a brief retreat—two or three or four days—thinking this will be easier. But actually it's harder because those are the hardest days. You're just beginning to get a sense of what's going on, and then it's time to go home.

Yes, I know what you mean. I've always found that on retreat, day two and day three are the hardest. After that, it gets easier. So perhaps that's useful advice for those considering their first retreat.

Thank you very much, Patrick, for coming on the show. I really appreciate it, and all the very best for the future.

Thank you. Thank you for the invitation.

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