The Noble Silence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 34:54

Buddhism without insight meditation would be like a whole system of medical theory without the medicine. The practice of insight *vipassanā* has two functions. It begins to reveal to us a way of being in the world and in daily life and it begins to reveal a way of discovering the deepest recesses within our mind. Here we are concerned with finding out why this is and how it is done. We are going to see why intensive retreats are important to the ardent meditator.

Within the process of vipassanā insight meditation there are two functions. Firstly to purify the mind and secondly to make insight. Both are achieved by the slow establishment of silence. Silence here means stillness, quietness, a situation such as a very bright, clear, windless day in which to observe the countryside.

To make this easier for us to understand, I've drawn a diagram to suggest the human is made up of three major casings, and each casing is made up of layer upon layer. The first casing, the outer shell, is the personality, the outer person everyone else knows us by. It is the way we relate to the world, communicate with it. It's how we interact with people.

In order to delve deeper into our mind, this outer circle, this casing, has to be shut down, quietened. This is why, when we look at the guidelines for an intensive retreat, we see people are asked to keep silent outwardly. There is no longer to be communication or interaction with others. As far as we are concerned, other people are here, on the course, as silent companions, who are dumb, deaf and blind. There's no need anymore even to greet people, to say hello in the morning, or to ask how they are. There's no need even to signal to people to let them pass on the staircase. One decides for oneself, either moving or waiting for the other to pass. At mealtimes, we eat as if no one else were in the room. We just let go of the usual graces of passing the salt and pouring out another's drink. We are learning to be alone. For on the journey inward, there will be no one to accompany us.

People who come on a course for the first time find this very strange, even a strain. They feel it selfish and unnatural. Well, of course it is strange, but such behaviour is there for a purpose. When we see others are behaving in the same way, the strain will go. It would be selfish if it was not an agreed contract between all members of the course, but we have agreed to behave like this for the duration. It is unnatural, if by unnatural we mean unusual. But again, there are many unnatural things that have to be done in different circumstances for different purposes. How unnatural it is to push buttons eight hours a day or walk a tightrope. The purpose of this silence between meditators to the point of non-communication is because we need to shut down the outer person in order to gaze into the inner person. As we shall see, this takes

great effort, and our energy will be dissipated if it has to go outward to people.

This is also the reason we slow down our movements to about half pace. Our lives are generally full of rush and bother. We create great disturbances and noise by the way we go walking heavily on our feet, tramping upstairs, the way we bang doors, the way we open and close curtains. At mealtime we make a great crash with the knives and forks and spoons. Some people slurp their drink or chomp their food totally oblivious to the noise they're making. In other situations this might be acceptable behaviour, but on such a course as this, any noise means that the meditator is not being aware of creating silence. Such noise will also draw another meditator's attention, thereby distracting her from the business of looking inward.

Especially around and in the meditation room, great effort must be made by meditators not to create even a milli-decibel of noise. That is why meditators are asked to move extremely slowly and deliberately. And this is most important in the meditation room itself, where any action, such as preparing to sit or changing posture, should be done with the quietness of a door mouse. Being aware of the noise we make will heighten our sense of awareness. Being aware of the silence we are creating will deepen our concentration. In this way, meditators find their meditation greatly enhanced.

The outer person is not simply an expression of the inner person. It also has its own effect on the inner person. If we outwardly get caught up in someone's excitement, we find ourselves getting excited within us. If we're with someone who's depressed, often we ourselves begin to get depressed. Moods and emotions are infectious. The meditator experiences the calming of the inner person when the outer person is stilled.

This stillness is most important on the level of morality. If we do harm to any being, this causes great disturbance in the mind. If we get angry and have an argument with someone, this causes a great fire of agitation that can take hours to die down. Such happenings on a course such as this would destroy the whole environment immediately, not just for the two litigants either. For this reason, all participants take on certain training rules which cut out this possibility. Here, within this space, all meditators should feel very safe, very secure, protected. How impossible it would be for us to look inward if we knew someone here was waiting for an opportunity to kill us.

No, we have all agreed to do no harm whatsoever, not even to a bug. We have also agreed not to steal another's possessions, to have no sexual activity whatsoever, not to talk at all so no one can get into an argument in the first place, and finally, to take no alcohol or drugs. In this way, we have a basis for a very harmonious and peaceful society. We can rest in this environment. What's more, to stop causing harm to ourselves, we've taken on a rule not to eat after twelve, so there's no chance of overeating. We've also determined not to oversleep, thereby tempting others to become lazy and waste the weekend. And we've determined not to disturb anyone by arousing the passions with perfumes and aftershaves, music, dancing and hula hoops. So you can see this *sīla*, morality, is vital in this sort of situation. It is of paramount importance if we're going to close down that outer personality and turn the energy inward to

discover the inner person.

It's very difficult at first. It is hard to slow down and be deliberate about everything we do. Even turning the handle of the door must be done with careful, slow deliberation. But with effort, our mindfulness will increase. Then, once this has been achieved, the problems of tackling the inner person can be faced.

By this inner person I mean all the moods, emotions and feelings, all the fantasies and all the interior dialogues. To achieve this silence of mind we have to understand how we achieved such a busy mind in the first place. It was through wrong view and wrong intention that we built up a mind full of negative states. These negative states, for the most part, lie dormant and arise only when certain stimuli come along. For instance, my anger presupposes a certain disposition to react with anger when something happens. We've taught ourselves to get angry whenever someone disagrees with us. We've found this a very useful ploy, since for the most part it wins the argument for us, or at least most opponents retire frustrated if not defeated. Until similar occasions arise, our anger will lie dormant.

However, as soon as we sit in meditation, just then when all stimuli have been shut down around us, just then when in a perfect circumstance of silence and support, all the anger starts coming up for no apparent reason.

To illustrate why this is, an interesting tale is told in the scriptures of a teacher of the Dharma, who actually never meditated. He noticed that over a period of time, all his students became highly attained spiritually, and some even had a hat. He finally decided to go and seek their help. However, when he approached them, they'd simply say they were too busy and pass him on to another. The reason was that he had the sort of mind which questioned and argued. They presumed he'd never take their advice. Eventually, one of the monks asked him to approach a young boy. A little humbled, he nevertheless did so and asked the child how to meditate.

The *sāmaṇera*, or young novice monk, asked him how he would catch a snake he knew to be in a mound that had six exits. The Dharma teacher said he would do this by blocking up five exits and would simply wait patiently for the snake to come out. The young sāmaṇera said exactly so. He pointed out to the teacher that if he wanted to observe the mind, he had to close the five senses.

In other words, when we meditate, we are stopping the mind using its usual means of expression. Normally, if we are angry, we'd shout and throw something. It would be expressed in some way. But now, in the outer silence of the senses, in the stillness of the sitting posture, the mind becomes filled with its own anger and nowhere to express it. Suddenly, the meditator is faced with raw anger.

Unfortunately, it's not quite as simple as it seems, for now this anger does find an outlet, and that's of course the mind itself, the sixth hole in the mound. The mind itself creates a dream in which anger can satisfy itself. There we are, sitting very still. To anyone coming into the meditation room, we seem so quiet, so silent. But internally, our minds are in a vast commotion. Fantasies of shouting and hitting, of

slaughter and mayhem, vast battles in huge war arenas are conjured up in our minds, fuelled by all the unleashed anger that can no longer find expression through the body into the world.

Even though these fantasies are not willed by the meditator, even though she finds herself caught up in them unwittingly, she is not only entertaining the anger but feeding it. How do we know this? We know this because the fantasies, if left unchecked, grow more and more violent, more and more angry, so that states of mind are being developed.

Fantasies and all internal dialogues have to be vigorously noted as soon as one becomes aware of them, and the attention brought back immediately to the underlying feelings or sensations of anger in the body. And if these sensations are not obvious, then we must return to the process of breath.

Now of course it's not just anger that causes this type of mental agitation. The Buddha in fact taught there were five causes that hindered the meditator's progress. They are called *nīvaraṇa* and are normally translated as hindrances. The five hindrances to concentration are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry and sceptical doubt.

When these states of mind arise, we also recognise them in the meditation for what they are. In a volume of smaller sayings, this is how the Buddha tells meditators how to meditate on these states of mind: "Herein, O disciples, when some desire is present, the meditator knows there is some desire in me. And when desire is absent, he knows there is no sense desire in me. He knows how the latent sense desire comes to arise. He knows how to reject sense desire once it has arisen. And he knows how to prevent the arising of sense desire in the future."

For sense desire, read also ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. We shall take these five in turn and see how they cover all negative states of mind. It's a neat classification by which the meditator can quickly recognise what state of mind he is in and so quickly decide on a course of action. The instructions which follow are particularly to do with vipassanā insight meditation, though they can be useful in ordinary daily life.

It is a fact that our minds will always seek satisfaction now here and there. The mind always wants to be happy, excited, or at least contented. We have throughout our lives taught the mind to seek this happiness in pleasurable sensations that arise in the body. So whenever a stimulus from the outside world impinges upon the senses, be it pleasant music, a lovely scene, a cool ice cream, whatever it is, those resulting sensations is what the mind loves to indulge in, splash about in, wallow in.

When, in the situation of an intensive meditation course, all these stimuli are taken away, the mind becomes agitated and thrashes about, looking for those sensations it has come to expect. The body expresses that desire with empty feelings, craving feelings, wanting feelings, just like the pangs we feel when we get a little peckish and there are no biscuits about.

In the silence of a retreat there is no way to satisfy these demands, so the mind does a double take and

tries to create them all within itself. Suddenly we are in cascades upon cascades of dreams, fantasies and dialogues. Vast epics are played out in the mind, all expressing our desire for satisfaction now here, now there.

Sexual pleasure and erotic delight are without doubt the most delicious of sensual experiences. You can see its search already dominating the lives of fourteen and fifteen year olds. Our society has encouraged its indulgence. A whole generation and the up and coming generation are left gasping like salivating dogs at the smell of meat. So we as a culture stand agape before tantalising flesh. Whenever you look at newspapers, billboards, virtually all films, the pleasures of sex are turned at us. The power of the image conditions our minds to seek these pleasures. And if it is reinforced with actual experience, sexual, erotic desire becomes for us a great craving and attachment. Should we then be so surprised that once all the avenues for its indulgence are shut, it becomes so insistent in the mind?

I talk of sex since that is a very usual hindrance of desire. But others include food and drink, power and status, fame and glory. Indeed, any pleasure you can name can develop this obsessive quality.

What can we do? In a meditation course, we are concerned to shut down the higher faculties of the mind. We are concerned to shut down imagination and thinking. When these are calmed, the intuitive mind is no longer clouded and can begin to see things as they really are. Therefore, our aim is to put an end to fantasy and imaginative thinking for the duration of the course.

The most important starting point is our determination not to get caught up in them. This has to be a most determined decision, a most resolute resolution. If there is one chink in that resolution, one little teeny-weeny bit of undetermined will, if there is but one small milli-ounce of will that still wants to indulge in sensual pleasure, we can be assured that before we know it, the whole mind will be indulging, and the resolution will have been destroyed. The meditator becomes discouraged. She says she can't control her mind. The meditator gives up and says meditation is not for him. Our wills must be steeled against sensual indulgence.

In this way, as soon as there is so much as a tickle, the attention will be immediately drawn to it. As soon as the meditator is aware of it and remains aware of it, noting it, it will begin to pass away. This is an important point to grasp. When a thought arises out of the subconscious, say a sudden picture of cheese, that image is immediately grasped by desire, our conditioned states of mind, the *saṅkhāra*. Energy is put into it, and the whole higher mind becomes engaged in developing that initial image. And so the powers of imaginative thinking will go into creating a huge banquet around the initial image of cheese.

The meditator, who has made that resolute resolution, who is ardent and energetic, will catch that fantasy at birth, that first image. In so doing, he preempts the conditioning to develop it. He gets between the desired image and the desiring attachment. This stops, this calms the higher mind, and the awareness can then gaze intelligently and energetically at the object. The higher mind can be engaged in naming it, in labelling it, but that distance of the objective observer must be kept inviolate.

The object, the image of cheese, has been produced by latent energy in the subconscious. It needs fuel. It needs the higher mind to develop it, or it will simply lose energy. To the meditator's delight, as she gazes, observes this image intently, it passes, it just fades away. Most times it just vanishes. She is left with feelings in the body which are then more easily observed just as the sensations caused by the breath process are observed.

Here then is how we tackle sensual desire in vipassanā insight meditation. We determine with an unshakable active resolution not to get caught up in sense pleasure. We determine with an unshakable resolute resolution to be awake, alert like a sentinel.

As soon as any pleasing image or feeling arises, the meditator zaps it with alert, keen, intelligent awareness and stays with it, regarding it as a scientist, with objectivity, until it passes away. Then, back to the breath process.

As with sensual desire, so also with other images, thoughts and feelings concerning the whole area of ill-will and aversion. Images of people and things we dislike, grudging dialogues where we never forgive the insult or the harm done, the great battles and wars fought to death inspired by revenge, scenes of cruelty and inflicted suffering on our enemies and rivals.

All these, like desire, give the mind great satisfaction, for the mind wants to indulge its ill will. There is relief to be had in letting off steam. There's pleasure to be had in revenge and cruelty. But with the same technique of alert, keen awareness, we catch these movements of aversion in the mind, snip them quickly in the bud, and know them to be aversion and ill-will. Know them to be harmful and observe them intently and equanimously. We must become the objective observers of the mind's ill-will and aversion.

One of my meditation teachers, the Venerable Ujjanaka, used to call the third hindrance, sloth and torpor, the meditator's two very good friends. And that's just how they present themselves. They are very clever, full of subtle argument and pretense. But we must beware, for they are fifth columnists, traitors, and will sell us out to the enemy.

They tell us we're tired. We've worked hard enough. There's no more energy. It's too much, too much suffering. No one has suffered like me. It's time to rest now. Ah, sleep, sleep. You've earned it. Just a little rest, just five minutes, that's all. What's five minutes? And we'll wake up so refreshed. Go on, that's it. Just lie down. Rest just a moment. Ah, and we've gone. Five minutes, sixteen minutes, one hour, two hours, three hours, and we wake. And we know we've been duped. No, we've fooled ourselves.

As very small children, we're often taught to find the end of our problems in sleep. When their children are irritable or weepy, or making a lot of noise, parents will say they're tired, they need sleep. Now maybe they do, but often it's an excuse for putting the kids to bed and out of the way. Either way, the children learn to overcome difficulties by zonking out.

Of course, one does wake refreshed. Sometimes sleeping on a problem does help. The mind has

subconscious ways of dealing with such things. But often, sleep is an indulgence, the Sunday lie-in. The whole day in bed with newspapers, plus trays of food and videos. But here, on our *vipassanā* insight meditation course, the indulgence in sleep is a destructor. For sleep saps our energy and leaves us groggy, our wills in tatters.

Our bodies work according to what is known as the circadian cycle. If this cycle is disturbed, we feel terrible. This is what happens in international flights and causes jet lag. Our sleep rhythms are disturbed. When we wake at the end of a sleep sequence and indulge in another hour or two, we unwittingly set up another cycle of sleep and we will feel groggy until it has been completed. The cycles vary in individuals from as little as five hours for adults to twelve or thirteen hours for young children. Here, of course, we have to beware not to start a cycle, or else this whole weekend meditation becomes an intensive sleeping meditation course.

Now all this has to be tempered by the fact that many of us live highly pressured lives, full of stress and worry. This takes its toll on our bodies and minds, and on a weekend course the whole Saturday can feel terrible, depending on what state of mind we've come with. But we still have to make sure that if we are going to sleep during the rest periods, that it is a real tiredness and not laziness, not the listlessness of depression, not a conditioned reaction to suffering, to boredom.

The Buddha, again in the shorter sayings, gives advice to his great disciple Moggallāna, who became an adept in all the great powers. He suggests six ways of overcoming sleepiness before deciding to lie down. Firstly, he says, not to dwell on it, not to give it attention—that is, to keep the mind on the process of breath, raising energy into the observation. If this doesn't work, the meditator should think about how harmful sloth and torpor are and recall to mind the effects they know of and then go back to the breath. The next is to repeat whatever doctrine one knows off by heart till the sloth is dispelled.

If this doesn't work, the Buddha advises us to rub our ears and limbs with the palms of our hands. Then the Buddha advises that if this fails, we should splash water over our faces. If that fails, we should walk up and down. At the end of all this effort to stay awake, if tiredness still overcomes us, then we should lie down. But mindfully, and he goes on, "Having awakened, you should rise quickly, thinking, I won't indulge in the enjoyment of lying down and reclining, in the enjoyment of sleep."

So what the Buddha wants us to do is to be aware of not giving in to tiredness. We have to test it in the context of our particular insight meditation practice. We can firstly try to put energy into observing. If that fails, we can rise and stretch ourselves slowly and silently. If that fails, we can do walking meditation. But if tiredness still seems to overcome us, then we can lie down with a determination to wake mindfully.

In longer courses, meditators always experience a loss of demand for sleep. Often, the first day or two is nothing but sloth and torpor. But then, because of the power of awareness and its purifying effects, sleep time drops to six hours and sometimes to four. Even in a week-long course, some meditators do without a night's sleep.

The difference between sloth and torpor is that sloth is felt in the body and torpor is felt in the mind. Often meditators experience torpor like a heavy cloud on the mind. Again, it is a matter of observing it and returning to the process of breath. But if one feels overcome by it, then walking meditation is the best answer.

Restlessness and worry, agitation and anxiety are the fourth hindrance. When we sit for some time, even if we begin in a calm way, a feeling can arise to get up, to move. We get fidgety. We start thinking about the time. Is the half hour or hour up yet? Maybe I've missed the bell. This restlessness can be caused by any reason. It might be some worry, real or imagined, that keeps coming up in the mind. It might be a lot of unresolved feelings which are all repressed and unknown to the meditator but cause such agitation in the mind and body.

In meditation the causes of such things are not important. We have to deal directly with the presenting problem. When restlessness comes we must raise our determination to sit still till it has passed or until the time allotted to the meditation is finished.

Here, unlike sloth and torpor, the energy is high, but it's fractured and bursting out all over the place. So our determination is placed into focusing the energy. When restlessness arises, we're much more concerned to sharpen the concentration and establish equanimity. To sharpen the concentration we can rest the attention on the breath, and whenever restlessness claims our attention we simply note it vigorously so as not to let it affect our thinking and our will to remain.

Remember, the work of a meditator is to see things objectively. When the restlessness is observed, it is done as by a stranger in an art gallery or museum. The restlessness manifests in the body, is seen and observed as something other. The awareness keeps its distance.

If there is ever a feeling that the restlessness is getting the better of us, if its suggestions to get up, to finish, cause us to make even the slightest movement of a finger or an eyelid, then we must take refuge in the breath process, bringing the concentration to bear until we have re-established our equanimity.

It is very important in this practice to overcome restlessness. If we give in, the next time is always that little bit harder to resist. If we are patient and wait until the restlessness begins to subside or even pass altogether, the next time will be that much easier.

Finally, there is sceptical doubt. Now this can be quite a disease with some people. The Buddha said the sceptic was the least able to make spiritual progress. The reason is that a person who doubts never moves. If I doubt whether I can dive off the top board at a swimming pool, I'll never do it. If I doubt my doctor's ability, I won't take the medicine.

As a hindrance to insight, there are three types of doubt. First, there is the doubt in the Buddha and what he taught, the Dhamma. Was he really enlightened? What does that mean anyway? How do I know he wasn't really as deluded as all of us? This Nibbāna is probably a hoax. It's just annihilation or something.

Then there's doubt in the meditation teacher. Well, how much does he know? How do I know he knows anything at all? He doesn't look saintly to me. She doesn't look enlightened at all. Maybe she's just on an ego trip.

Finally, there's doubting oneself. Yes, the Buddha was certainly enlightened. I've no doubt about that. The teacher's very good. She knows what she's doing. She's an excellent teacher. He's very fair. I understand him. It's me. I'm not up to it. I can't do it. I don't have the perfections, the necessary ability to achieve anything.

To undercut these sorts of doubts, that is why, of course, at the beginning of the weekend course we always take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, the Triple Gem. It's important to build up trust, to build confidence in the Triple Gem. This just means that a meditator will give it a go, that there will be a complete dedication to the task in hand, a steadiness of commitment.

Over such a short period as a weekend course, all that is asked is a total self-giving just for that period of time. In this way, after the weekend, a person can judge whether in fact there is anything to be gained from this meditation. We can think about it after the experience. If we don't lend ourselves totally to the experience, we'll never know whether it really works or not. It wouldn't be fair to oneself to give something a half-hearted go and then say, well, I didn't get much out of that.

By committing oneself totally to this meditation practice for a period of time, after that period, a meditator can look back and ask whether in fact there was any benefit. If a person suffers from overweight and goes to a health farm, he doesn't go there with his own set of conditions. He'll follow the regime. Going to a health farm demands a certain surrendering to the system, allowing the system to work itself on the person. It's not horrific. The person has read about such farms, has had friends who have gone there and praised the place and so on. He knows generally what to expect, and it doesn't last forever. He goes on trial for a serious, dedicated, energetic trial.

It is in this way we can overcome sceptical doubt in our meditation practice and on such a course as this. We dismiss all doubt, push it gently to the side and dedicate ourselves to the practising of the technique. After we've gone through the ordeal, then we can look back and judge. If we have gained nothing, then at least we've cleared out one venue of exploration. Now we know vipassanā insight meditation is not for us.

We have to be so careful not to waste precious time getting caught up in all that internal argumentation. Voice 1 saying, "Let's go, this is silly." Voice 2 saying, "No, let's stay, it's interesting." Voice 3 saying, "This is all very dangerous." Voice 4, "What is all this Buddhist stuff anyway?" Voice 5, "We should have gone to see that film."

Doubt creates great splits in the mind, and all the emotions of fear, frustration, depression, and so on are conjured up, all adding fuel with voice upon voice. We get caught up in views and opinions. We lose the balance of our minds and become more and more confused by the arguments, raging on and on until we

give up in despair. "I'll never know the truth. The truth can't be known." Or we end up in cold dismissiveness. "It's all rubbish."

This hindrance of sceptical doubt is easily undermined by raising confidence in the triple gem, the teacher and oneself. Remember, faith is not belief. The Buddha didn't ask us to believe him. He just said, "Come and try, see if it works."

When sceptical doubt arises in the mind, just smile. Brush it gently to the side. Say to yourself that you will deal with all these worries after the course. Remind yourself that all doubt is dispelled through experience. For what is the root cause of all our doubting if it is not ignorance? We don't actually know. We're afraid of our unknowing. When we know, there is no doubt.

I can spend a whole lifetime worrying and doubting whether I can dive off the top board or not. But when I experience it, when I do it, what happens to the doubt? Doubt is a great conjurer. We must determine not to get caught up in its tricks. We must determine to put our effort into the practice.

So there we have the five hindrances, the *nīvaraṇa*, which create so much bother and commotion within the inner person. The Buddha likened this mind to a pot of water. When the water is mixed with different colours, it is like a mind possessed with sensual desire. A person looking into it cannot properly recognise their own face. When the pot is boiling and bubbling, it's like a mind filled with anger. When the water is covered with moss and water plants, it's like a mind overcome with sloth and torpor. When the water is stirred and agitated by the wind, it is like a mind overcome with restlessness and worry. When the water has become turbid and muddy, it is like a mind overcome with doubt.

In all cases, when a person looks into such a pot, he will not recognise or see the image of his own face. When we are overcome by these hindrances, we cannot see things as they really are. We are deluded by them. Although these hindrances do not entirely disappear till full enlightenment, when we learn to deal with them on a meditation course, we are achieving the first steps in overcoming them.

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