



bodhi tree

FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Practicing Vipassana Meditation – Ven. Pannyavaro

Many people all over the world are now practicing the Buddhist meditation known as Vipassana or Insight Meditation. Western psychotherapies have taken it up as ‘mindfulness’ as well as ordinary people who have found it beneficial in coping with the stresses and strains of modern life. While many are increasingly taking time out to attend retreats in Vipassana meditation centres.

Vipassana meditation can be done quite successfully to some extent in everyday life on an occasional, casual basis as long as the practitioner has an ongoing commitment. However, to realise its ultimate benefit the practice needs to deepen, and that is best done in a supportive retreat environment where the meditator can be completely focused on the practice.

We can't gloss over the fact that Vipassana meditation is a demanding practice. It requires serious practitioners to devote themselves full-time to the practice in a retreat situation in order to be able to sustain the practice with appropriate intensity. This needs supportive conditions such as have been itemised in the Theravada meditation manual the “Path of Purification” as the seven types of suitability:

- Place or Dwelling – a well-furnished and supported retreat centre or monastery, secluded and quiet, easily accessible, few insects, with the basic requirements of food, clothes and medicine.
- Location – not too far from or close to a town.
- Food – a balanced diet, healthy, digestible and nourishing, taken in moderate amounts.
- People – other meditators as companions, who are considerate, with a good attitude and practice.
- The Teacher – a learned and respected teacher, who speaks and listens well.
- Noble Silence – the support of ‘noble silence’ has to be maintained throughout the practice, other than at interviews with the teacher.
- The Weather – not too hot or cold, ideally a temperate climate.

Vipassana retreat centres catering for lay people are quite a recent trend in Buddhism; originating in Myanmar after the Second World War when the first Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, a keen meditator, invited the late Venerable

Mahasi Sayadaw to teach in a meditation centre that was set up in Yangon, the Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha.

This was the beginning of the modern revival of Vipassana meditation which, while originating in Myanmar, was soon to spread to other Theravada Buddhist countries in South East Asia and then later to retreat centres established in the West. Now many Vipassana retreat centres, in various traditions, have been set up around the world to provide the conditions needed for Vipassana practice, usually to the exclusion of any religious or study activities.

A worldwide Vipassana Meditation culture has evolved which caters for lay meditators who are not necessarily Buddhists, often with lay teachers, supported by senior monastic teachers in the same lineage. This style of practice, while demanding, has proved to be popular because its methods and techniques can be systematically taught and its practitioners are usually able to experience at least the psychological insights and healing benefits from its practice. This development has created a pool of knowledge and experience in Vipassana practice with trained teachers in many different countries.

An introductory Vipassana retreat usually lasts two or three days. These introductory retreats are more in the nature of workshops, where one learns the techniques and methods involved under the guidance of a teacher. The intensive Vipassana retreats are more challenging and can run for ten, twenty or thirty days, and up to three months of fulltime practice. It is a requirement of attending a Vipassana retreat that participants undertake the Five or Eight Precepts. These precepts are the foundation of all Buddhist training. The underlying principle is non-exploitation of yourself or others. With a developed ethical base, much of the emotional conflict and stress that we experience is resolved, allowing commitment and more conscious choice.

The retreats are conducted in 'Noble Silence', which besides no talking includes no communication through eye contact or body language, no listening to music, and no reading or writing except for brief notes to record the meditation experience. There are, however, opportunities to discuss the practice with the teacher during individual interviews or during group discussions.

A typical retreat day begins between 5 am and 6 am and usually ends around 9 pm or 10 pm with a rest period in the middle of the day after lunch. The whole day is spent practising sitting and walking meditation, together with cultivating continuous attention to the changing nature of one's moment-to-moment experience during daily activities. The retreat teacher gives evening talks to explain and inspire the practice, providing a time for questions and answers, as well as conducting a personal interview that usually occurs on every second day.

An intensive Vipassana meditation retreat is a challenging undertaking, which requires effort and self-discipline. A retreat is not just a chance to escape the pressures of daily life, nor is it time out in which to do one's own thing. Rather

it is an opportunity to cultivate the Buddha's Way of Liberation, based on the practice of ethics to harmonise one's mind and mindfulness meditation that leads to deep insights. Walking this path, we can learn to abandon actions of body, speech and mind that bring suffering to ourselves and those around us, and cultivate actions that bring happiness and harmony to ourselves and also to those with whom we are in relationship with.

Above all, the Vipassana retreat is a situation that requires the meditator to leave aside mundane concerns and commit oneself to the training. In order to heal and purify the mind and bring about the transformation of consciousness that the Buddha declared has the potential to realise Nibbana in this very life.

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