

# Buddha's Path Is to Experience Reality

by S.N. Goenka

*The following has been condensed from a public talk given by S.N. Goenka in Bangkok, Thailand in September, 1989.*

Most Venerable *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*, friends, devotees of Lord Buddha:

You have all assembled here to understand what Vipassana is and how it helps us in our day-to-day lives; how it helps us to come out of our misery, the misery of life and death. Everyone wants to come out of misery, to live a life of peace and harmony. We simply do not know how to do this. It was Siddhattha Gotama's enlightenment that made him realize the truth: where misery lies, how it starts, and how it can be eradicated.

There were many techniques of meditation prevailing in those days, as there are today. The *Bodhisatta* Gotama tried them all, but he was not satisfied because he found that he was not fully liberated from misery. Then he started to do his own research. Through his personal experience he discovered this technique of Vipassana, which eradicated misery from his life and made him a fully enlightened person.

There are many techniques that give temporary relief. When you become miserable you divert your attention to something else. Then you feel that you have come out of your misery, but you are not totally relieved.

If something undesirable has happened in life, you become agitated. You cannot bear this misery and want to run away from it. You may go to a cinema or a theatre, or you may indulge in other sensual entertainments. You may go out drinking, and so on. All this is running away from misery. Escape is no solution to the problem—indeed the misery is multiplying.

In Buddha's enlightenment he realized that one must face reality. Instead of running away from the problem, one must face it. He found that all the types of meditation existing in his day consisted of merely diverting the mind from the prevailing misery to another object. He found that practising this, actually only a small part of the mind gets diverted. Deep inside one keeps reacting, one keeps generating *sarikhāras* (reactions) of craving, aversion or delusion, and one keeps suffering at a deep level of the mind. The object of meditation should not be an imaginary object, it should be reality—reality as it is. One has to work with whatever reality has manifested itself now, whatever one experiences within the framework of one's own body.

In the practice of Vipassana one has to explore the reality within oneself—the material structure and the mental structure, the combination of which one keeps calling "I, me, mine." One generates a tremendous amount of attachment to this material and mental structure, and as a result becomes miserable. To practise Buddha's path we must observe the truth of mind

and matter. Their basic characteristics should be directly experienced by the meditator. This results in wisdom.

Wisdom can be of three types: wisdom gained by listening to others, that which is gained by intellectual analysis, and wisdom developed from direct, personal experience. Before Buddha, and even at the time of Buddha, there were teachers who were teaching morality, were teaching concentration, and who were also talking about wisdom. But this wisdom was only received or intellectualized wisdom. It was not wisdom gained by personal experience. Buddha found that one may play any number of intellectual or devotional games, but unless he experiences the truth himself, and develops wisdom from his personal experience, he will not be liberated. Vipassana is personally experienced wisdom. One may listen to discourses or read scriptures. Or one may use the intellect and try to understand: “Yes, Buddha’s teaching is wonderful! This wisdom is wonderful!” But that is not direct experience of wisdom.

The entire field of mind and matter—the six senses and their respective objects—have the basic characteristics of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (egolessness). Buddha wanted us to experience this reality within ourselves. To explore the truth within the framework of the body, he designated two fields. One is the material structure: the corporeal structure, the physical structure. The other is the mental structure with four factors: consciousness; perception; the part of the mind that feels sensation; and the part of the mind that reacts. So to explore both fields he gave us *kāyānupassanā* (observation of the body) and *cittānupassanā* (observation of the mind).

How can you observe the body with direct experience unless you can feel it? There must be something happening in the body which you feel, which you realize. Then you can say, “Yes, I have practised *kāyānupassanā*.” One must feel the sensations on the body: this is *vedanānupassanā* (observation of body sensations).

The same is true for *cittānupassanā*. Unless something arises in the mind, you cannot directly experience it. Whatever arises in the mind is *dhamma* (mental content). Therefore *dhammānupassanā* (observation of the contents of the mind) is necessary for *cittānupassanā*.

This is how the Buddha divided these practices. *Kāyānupassanā* and *vedanānupassanā* pertain to the physical structure. *Cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā* pertain to the mental structure. See from your personal experience how this mind and matter are related to each other. To believe that one understands mind and matter, without having directly experienced it, is delusion. It is only direct experience that will make us understand the reality about mind and matter. This is where Vipassana starts helping us.

In brief, understand how we practise Vipassana. We start with Anapana, awareness of respiration—natural respiration. We don’t make it a breathing exercise or regulate the breath as they do in *prāṇāyāma*. We observe respiration at the entrance of the nostrils. If a meditator works continuously in a congenial atmosphere without any disturbance, within two or three days some subtle reality on this part of the body will start manifesting itself: some sensations—natural, normal bodily sensations. Maybe heat or cold, throbbing or pulsing or some other

sensations. When one reaches the fourth or fifth day of practice, he or she will find that there are sensations throughout the body, from head to feet. One feels those sensations, and is asked not to react to them. Just observe; observe objectively, without identifying yourself with the sensations.

When you work as Buddha wanted you to work, by the time you reach the seventh day or the eighth day, you will move towards subtler and subtler reality. The Dhamma (natural law) will start helping you. You observe this structure that initially appears to be so solid, the entire physical structure at the level of sensation. Observing, observing you will reach the stage when you experience that the entire physical structure is nothing but subatomic particles: throughout the body, nothing but *kalāpas* (subatomic particles). And even these tiniest subatomic particles are not solid. They are mere vibration, just wavelets. The Buddha's words become clear by experience:

*Sabbo pajjalito loko, sabbo loko pakampito.*

The entire universe is nothing but combustion and vibration.

As you experience it yourself, your *kāyānupassanā*, your *vedanānupassanā*, will take you to the stage where you experience that the entire material world is nothing but vibration. Then it becomes very easy for you to practise *cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā*.

Buddha's teaching is to move from the gross, apparent truth to the subtlest, ultimate truth, from *oḷārika* to *sukhuma*. The apparent truth always creates illusion and confusion in the mind. By dividing and dissecting apparent reality, you will come to the ultimate reality. As you experience the reality of matter to be vibration, you also start experiencing the reality of the mind: *viññāṇa* (consciousness), *saññā* (perception), *vedanā* (sensation) and *saṅkhāra* (reaction). If you experience them properly with Vipassana, it will become clear how they work.

Suppose you have reached the stage where you are experiencing that the entire physical structure is just vibration. If a sound has come in contact with the ears you will notice that this sound is nothing but vibration. The first part of the mind, consciousness, has done its job: ear consciousness has recognized that something has happened at the ear sense door. Like a gong which, having been struck at one point, begins vibrating throughout its structure, so a contact with any of the senses begins a vibration which spreads throughout the body. At first this is merely a neutral vibration, neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The perception recognizes and evaluates the sound, "It is a word—what word? Praise! Oh, wonderful, very good!" The resulting sensation, the vibration, will become very pleasant. In the same way, if the words are words of abuse the vibration will become very unpleasant. The vibration changes according to the evaluation given by the perception part of the mind. Next the third part of the mind starts feeling the sensation: pleasant or unpleasant.

Then the fourth part of the mind will start working. This is reaction; its job is to react. If a pleasant sensation arises, it will react with craving. If an unpleasant sensation arises, it will react with aversion. Pleasant sensation: "I like it. Very good! I want more, I want more!"

Similarly, unpleasant sensation: “I dislike it. I don’t want it.” Generating craving and aversion is the part played by the fourth factor of the mind—reaction.

Understand that this process is going on constantly at one sense door or another. Every moment something or the other is happening at one of the sense doors. Every moment the respective consciousness cognizes; the perception recognizes; the feeling part of the mind feels; and the reacting part of the mind reacts, with either craving or aversion. This happens continuously in one’s life.

At the apparent, surface level, it seems that I am reacting with either craving or aversion to the external stimulus. Actually this is not so. Buddha found that we are reacting to our sensations. This discovery was the enlightenment of Buddha. He said:

*Salāyatana-paccayā phasso  
phassa-paccayā vedanā  
vedanā-paccayā taṇhā.*

With the base of the six senses, contact arises  
with the base of contact, sensation arises  
with the base of sensation, craving arises.

It became so clear to him: the six sense organs come in contact with objects outside. Because of the contact, a sensation starts in the body that, most of the time, is either pleasant or unpleasant. Then after a pleasant or unpleasant sensation arises, craving or aversion start—not before that. This realization was possible because Buddha went deep inside and experienced it himself. He went to the root of the problem and discovered how to eradicate the cause of suffering at the root level.

Working at the intellectual level of the mind, we try to suppress craving and aversion, but deep inside, craving and aversion continue. We are constantly rolling in craving or aversion. We are not coming out of misery through suppression.

Buddha discovered the way: whenever you experience any sensation, due to any reason, you simply observe it:

*Samudaya dhammānupassī vā kāyasmimṃ viharati  
vaya dhammānupassī vā kāyasmimṃ viharati  
samudaya-vaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmimṃ viharati.*

He dwells observing the phenomenon of arising in the body.  
He dwells observing the phenomenon of passing away in the body.  
He dwells observing the phenomenon of simultaneous arising and passing away in the body.

Every sensation arises and passes away. Nothing is eternal. When you practise Vipassana you start experiencing this. However unpleasant a sensation may be—look, it arises only to

pass away. However pleasant a sensation may be, it is just a vibration—arising and passing. Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, the characteristic of impermanence remains the same. You are now experiencing the reality of *anicca*. You are not believing it because Buddha said so, or some scripture or tradition says so, or even because your intellect says so. You accept the truth of *anicca* because you directly experience it. This is how your received wisdom and intellectual understanding turn into personally experienced wisdom.

Only this experience of *anicca* will change the habit pattern of the mind. Feeling sensation in the body and understanding that everything is impermanent, you don't react with craving or aversion; you are equanimous. Practising this continually changes the habit of reacting at the deepest level. When you don't generate any new conditioning of craving and aversion, old conditioning comes on the surface and passes away. By observing reality as it is, you become free from all your conditioning of craving and aversion.

Western psychologists refer to the "conscious mind." Buddha called this part of the mind the *paritta citta* (a very small part of the mind). There is a big barrier between the *paritta citta* and the rest of the mind at deeper levels. The conscious mind does not know what is happening in the unconscious or half-conscious. Vipassana breaks this barrier, taking you from the surface level of the mind to the deepest level of the mind. The practice exposes the *anusaya kilesa* (latent mental defilements) that are lying at the deepest level of the mind.

The so-called "unconscious" mind is not unconscious. It is always conscious of body sensations, and it keeps reacting to them. If they are unpleasant, it reacts with aversion. If they are pleasant, it reacts with craving. This is the habit pattern, the behaviour pattern, of the so-called unconscious at the depth of the mind.

Here is an example to explain how the so-called unconscious mind is reacting with craving and aversion. You are in deep sleep. A mosquito bites you and there is an unpleasant sensation. Your conscious mind does not know what has happened. The unconscious knows immediately that there is an unpleasant sensation, and it reacts with aversion. It drives away or kills the mosquito. But still there is an unpleasant sensation, so you scratch, though your conscious mind is in deep sleep. When you wake up, if somebody asks you how many mosquito bites you got during the night, you won't know. Your conscious mind was unaware but the unconscious knew, and it reacted.

Another example: Sitting for about half an hour, some pressure starts somewhere and the unconscious mind reacts: "There is a pressure. I don't like it!" You change your position. The unconscious mind is always in contact with the body sensations. You make a little movement, and then after some time you move again. Just watch somebody sitting for fifteen to twenty minutes. You will find that this person is fidgeting, shifting a little here, a little there. Of course, consciously he does not know what he is doing. This is because he is not aware of the sensations. He does not know that he is reacting with aversion to these sensations. This barrier is ignorance.

Vipassana breaks this ignorance. Then one starts understanding how sensations arise and

how they give rise to craving or aversion. When there is a pleasant sensation, there is craving. When there is an unpleasant sensation, there is aversion, and whenever there is craving or aversion, there is misery.

If one does not break this behaviour pattern, there will be continual craving or aversion. At the surface level you may say that you are practising what Buddha taught, but in fact, you are not practising what Buddha taught! You are practising what the other teachers at the time of Buddha taught. Buddha taught how to go to the deepest level where suffering arises. Suffering arises because of one's reaction of craving or aversion. The source of craving and aversion must be found, and one must change one's behaviour pattern at that level.

Buddha taught us to observe suffering and the arising of suffering. Without observing these two we can never know the cessation of misery. Suffering arises with the sensations. If we react to sensations, then suffering arises. If we do not react we do not suffer from them. However unpleasant a sensation may be, if you don't react with aversion, you can smile with equanimity. You understand that this is all *anicca*, impermanence. The whole habit pattern of the mind changes at the deepest level.

Through the practice of Vipassana, people start to come out of all kinds of impurities of the mind—anger, passion, fear, ego, and so on. Within a few months or a few years the change in people becomes very evident. This is the benefit of Vipassana, here and now. In this very life you will get the benefit.

This is the land of Dhamma, a land of the teaching of Buddha, a land where you have such a large Saṅgha. Make use of the teaching of Buddha at the deepest level. Don't just remain at the surface level of the teaching of Buddha. Go to the deepest level where your craving arises:

*Vedanā paccayā taṇhā;*  
*vedanā-nirodhā taṇhā-nirodho;*  
*taṇhā-nirodhā dukkha-nirodho.*

Sensations give rise to craving.  
If sensations cease, craving ceases.  
When craving ceases, suffering ceases.

When one experiences the truth of *nibbāna*—a stage beyond the entire sensorium—all the six sense organs stop working. There can't be any contact with objects outside, so sensation ceases. At this stage there is freedom from all suffering.

First you must reach the stage where you can feel sensations. Only then can you change the habit pattern of your mind. Work on this technique, this process, at the very deepest level. If you work on the surface level of the mind you are only changing the conscious part of the mind, your intellect. You are not going to the root cause, the most unconscious level of the mind; you are not removing the *anusaya kilesa*—deep-rooted defilements of craving and aversion. They are like sleeping volcanoes that may erupt at any time. You continue to roll from birth to death; you are not coming out of misery.

Make use of this wonderful technique and come out of your misery, come out of the bondages and enjoy real peace, real harmony, real happiness.

May all of you enjoy real peace,  
real harmony, real happiness. •