

Narayan Helen Liebenson
The Principles and Practices of Shamatha Vipassana
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Hi everyone! My name is Narayan Helen Liebenson. The title of my talk is *The Principles and Practices of Shamatha Vipassana*. I come from the Theravada lineage and I am a guiding teacher here at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Additionally, I am a guiding teacher emeritus at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.

The focus of my talk will be on the richness and delight of this practice that was offered to us by the Buddha over 2,600 years ago. This topic is wonderful for both beginners—those of you who are just starting off, those of you who are just beginning the practice—and for those of us who are seasoned, experienced, and have been in the practice for much of our lives. This practice can serve as an ongoing arena of richness. There's so much to learn in terms of how *shamatha* interplays with *vipassana* and how much *vipassana* is dependent on *shamatha*. Before I define my terms and dive into the richness of this practice I would like to lead a short meditation.

Meditation:

Wherever you are while you are listening to this talk right now, come into a posture that is good for you, calm for you, grounded for you. Close your eyes if you're comfortable with your eyes closed. If you're not, it's fine to have them open, it doesn't matter. Be in your body right now, be aware of the whole body. Be aware of the whole body, just breathing. Be aware of where you are, the environment that you're in. Allow for calmness, encourage a sense of inner harmony. Relax into this body-mind experience.

Remember and infuse this moment with good-heartedness. Remember what called you to this practice, remember your deep vows and aspirations to know inner-freedom and to share this freedom with all beings everywhere.

May all beings everywhere find peace within themselves. May all beings everywhere find peace with one another. May all beings everywhere find peace.

Thank you for your kind attention. I would like to begin with the *Anguttara Nikaya*, a very short teaching of the Buddha's:

Two things will lead you to supreme understanding. What are these two? Tranquility and insight. If you develop tranquility, what benefit can you expect? Your mind will develop. And the benefit of a developed mind is that you are no longer bound to your impulses. If you develop insight, what benefit will it bring? You will find wisdom. And the point of



developing wisdom is that it brings you freedom from the blindness of ignorance. A mind held bound by unconsidered impulse and ignorance can never develop true understanding. But by way of tranquillity and insight, the mind will find liberation.

So here's what I want to talk about discuss today. The reason why I feel this practice is so rich is because there can be a hierarchy in the practice, where we think that some practices are baby practices and other practices are more advanced. Actually, we just need different practices at different times in our lives depending on the conditions that arise. At the same time, the principles of practice—meaning that calmness, tranquility—is a springboard out of which it is easier for wisdom to naturally emerge. This is true as well. For beginners in the practice, begin by calming the mind, begin by harmonizing, unifying the body and the mind, grounding oneself. This we do not want to ignore. This is a foundation out of which everything else can emerge and develop. Out of tranquillity, wisdom develops, and out of wisdom, a transformative understanding that brings about inner freedom emerges too.

At the same time, something that is also true for experienced and seasoned practitioners is that at particular times in one's life, it can be helpful to encourage a deeper kind of calm. If you are inclined towards more traditional wisdom practices, it can help tremendously to back up at times and bring in greater calm. One can move in leaps and bounds in wisdom if there is a greater capacity for calm. When facing difficulty or challenges in life, finding refuge in the calm is essential to remember that it is there to be found.

At other times, it's important to realize when one is not taking refuge in calm, but one is trying to escape into calm because it feels good and because of the meditative pleasure that arises when the mind is calmer. This is important to take note of because practice is not an escape. The only way we can escape is via real wisdom. This is the only way to uproot the torments of the heart, of greed, hatred, and delusion. And this requires facing ourselves, facing conditions, facing life as it is.

So when we want to take refuge in calm, that is very wonderful and important. Other times when we notice ourselves escaping into calm, this is when we want to summon up a kind of courage and dare ourselves to move toward the arena of wisdom. The only way wisdom can arise is by being with what is from moment to moment, whatever it is, undaunted by *dukkha*. I know that's a big thing to say—undaunted by *dukkha*, by the fragility, and difficulties and unsatisfactoriness of conditions. So we don't do it all at once. Step-by-step, we walk this path, with what is available to us—with our allies of lovingkindness and compassion, with the strength that calm offers. With shamatha, with calm, our hearts are strengthened. And then with this strength of



heart, we can more easily bear the difficult, and we can more easily see things as they are, which is vipassana.

Shamatha is translated as calmness or tranquility. Vipassana means to see into conditions as they are, not as they appear to be, how we would prefer them to be, or as we want them to be, but as they actually are. Seeing things as they are means to see into the instability, the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena. Seeing things as they are means to see into the non-solidity, the substanceless nature, the not-self nature, of all conditions.

Seeing things as they are means seeing into the reality that all conditions—no matter how seemingly terrific or wonderful, and many conditions are wonderful, which is to be seen as well—are limited. We see into conditions as a bridge into the unconditioned, the deathless, our own buddhanature, and the buddhanature of every being in this world, despite how things appear to be. This is vipassana.

The direction of this noble path is from impulse to aliveness and spontaneity. It is from ignorance to wisdom. The direction of this path is out of confusion and into clear-seeing, out of agitation and into calmness and tranquility. From tranquility to wisdom, and from wisdom into liberation, liberation of heart, inner liberation. So, as the Buddha says, tranquility (shamatha) and insight (vipassana) lead to inner liberation. Other translations include calmness and wisdom, peacefulness and transformative understanding, silence and illumination.

Now, I have said that with calmness as our foundation, as the basis of wisdom, as the mental chatter begins to calm itself and cease, wisdom has a greater chance of emerging, of thriving, of growing. But I do want to make the point that the opposite is true as well. It is important to be aware whether our minds tend towards curiosity and interest and not so much towards calmness and tranquility. For some of us to move towards wisdom, we can see that wisdom brings tranquility. The two play back and forth, they work with one another, they're interwoven. When we see something more clearly as it is, a greater tranquility and peacefulness comes in. Greater calm is possible in our lives. So they work back and forth, we truly need both shamatha and vipassana.

We need enough peace to look into our agitation. We need to develop enough of a sense of inner happiness to be able to look into our unhappiness. We need enough steadiness to bear looking into the fragility of all conditioned phenomena. Because in being curious and openhearted, we do want to encounter the pleasant as well as the unpleasant, the difficult as well as the easy, the



terrors as well as the enormous beauties possible in this life and this path that we are on. We want to open our hearts to it all. Slowly, slowly, step-by-step. It all happens on its own.

Before we end, I'll give you a sense of what a shamatha practice might look like and what a vipassana practice might look like. With a shamatha practice, we are interested in grounding, steadying, calming, harmonizing, and unifying.

Although we may get hints from teachers and from the Buddha, each one of us has to find out what path is best for us by following the guidelines of: What is grounding? What is unifying? What is harmonizing? We don't want to try to imitate or copy others.

We find for ourselves an anchor, touchstone, or primary object of meditation, that can keep us close to the here and now. Whatever it is, it anchors oneself to the here and now. And we can return to this anchor to time and again. We learn so much simply in recognizing that our attention has left the anchor, and that we can return. And then we can develop the patience and the lovingkindness to return. Happiness is only found here, not in any other moment that has passed or will come. It is all to be found right here.

This practice of returning is quite wonderful. We return, time and time again, through breathing, sitting, sound, or lovingkindness phrases.

But the key to this practice is returning and knowing that it doesn't matter how long we've been lost and gone, or confused and caught up in thinking, habits, and patterns. We can always return. The here and now is always here to return to. So in a sense, it's the practice of returning and sustaining our attention on the anchor as best we can, and then finding ourselves elsewhere. That is not our fault. It's the practice of not pausing and blaming oneself for having gotten confused for the ten-millionth time. The returning is our practice, as is taking note of our sincerity and sustaining our attention on the anchor. Again, as best as we are able to, we can't do any more than that.

Possible inquiry practices or practices that encourage wisdom move us in the direction of seeing things more clearly as they are. This is more a practice of opening. In vipassana practice, we are opening from moment to moment to whatever it is that occurs. Whatever it is that arises, we are curious and interested to look directly at what is happening. We can have different themes, such as looking at change, looking at emptiness. Or we can come up with a variety of meditative questions. I'll just share with you a favorite one of mine:



Is there any other moment better than this moment right now?

Another possible question:

Is there love for this too?

Another meditative question could be:

Who was it that is experiencing? Whatever you are experiencing—loneliness, anxiety, turbulence of heart, happiness, peacefulness—who is it that is experiencing this?

I encourage you to find your own questions. We are moving out of grasping, into love. This is the wisdom that we find in our practice. So returning and opening, we find home initially, in the anchor, we find our home in whatever we are returning to time and again. This home becomes a refuge. But it is an impermanent home. Eventually, we have to leave home, we have to find home wherever we are. So as we continue to practice opening, we do indeed find home wherever we are, with whomever we are with.

And gradually, we don't find home in the arisings, we don't find our home in objects, in conditions, in phenomena other than an impermanent way. Eventually, we learn how to love without attaching. We learn how to treasure without grasping. We find our home in the true aim of the Buddha's teachings, in the unconditioned, in the deathless, and in the now.

Okay, I'm done. Whatever is helpful or useful to you, please do take it up and practice. Whatever is not, let it go and find a way that is wise and beneficial for you. Thank you so much.