

Paper Four: Mastering Spacetime

Version 0.1

Steven Deobald*
vipassana-for-hackers.org
(Dated: 26 2019)

I. TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience for this paper remains “hackers” for the broadest possible definition of that word. If you are a curious and analytical person, you qualify. The new restriction placed on this paper is that you must have *completed* at least one 10-day Vipassana course (as taught by S.N. Goenka). To “complete” the course means that you left the course centre on the eleventh day and no sooner. Although Sayagyi U Ba Khin authorized many other teachers in addition to S.N. Goenka, the portions of this paper which deal with the systematic and global approach to the teaching require taking a course from S.N. Goenka or one of his authorized Assistant Teachers. Sayagyi U Ba Khin’s other students did not construct comparably systematic teaching methods.

This paper will discuss alternative methods of Vipassana instruction to S.N. Goenka’s system but even those discussions will be within the context of S.N. Goenka’s instruction as the global standard.

Readers may have chosen to dedicate their lives to the technique of Vipassana or they may still be searching. Portions of this paper will be dedicated to analyzing reasons to dedicate oneself to a single technique — as well as merits and drawbacks of choosing Vipassana as that technique.

The paper is best suited to Vipassana meditators who are looking to deepen and expand their practice. It is important to remember, however, that this paper is authored by non-teaching meditators and is no replacement for expert advice from a trained and authorized Assistant Teacher.

With these restrictions in mind, anyone is of course welcome to read the paper. However, much of what is being said will seem unnecessarily recondite to someone without the requisite practical meditation experience.

II. EKA MAGGO: THE ONE AND ONLY PATH

From one’s very first Vipassana course — in fact, from the discourse on the second day — a meditator is met

with two messages: that of *Eka Maggo* (the one and only path out of suffering) and the idea that the Noble Eightfold Path is “complete”. This section will address these two issues.

A. Learning Vipassana Elsewhere

For new meditators, Goenkaji addresses this issue during early courses. Although it isn’t a point that is repeatedly addressed, there are two quotes worth highlighting in this regard:

You call it “Vipassana” — you call it whatever you like.

Any technique which deals with sensations on the body is a technique of liberation.

Dissecting these two ideas quickly brings us to the conclusion that Goenka’s instruction in no way implies that he is the only legitimate teacher of Vipassana — just the most accessible. Anyone who has ever attempted a 10-day self course will attest to the sheer difficulty of attempting to recreate the environment of a Vipassana Centre in one’s own home. But it can be done and is even recommended in the Day 11 discourse before the course ends.

Between the 10-day introductory course, the 3-day course, and the Satipatthana Sutta course, the messaging becomes very clear: Vedana (sensations) are of utmost importance and terminology is of no importance. Many techniques refer to themselves as “Vipassana” but if they do not deal with sensation they are not relevant to the discussion, as we will see below in *How is Vipassana “Complete”?* Other techniques, such as Zen and Kundalini, which deal with sensation at least in part are of interest to a meditator convinced of the value of sensation analysis. It is up to each meditator to decide whether they prefer one technique or the other for analyzing sensation and pursue that one technique vigorously. The reasons for choosing only a single

* Correspondence email address: steven@deobald.ca

technique will be discussed in *Warnings: Do not mix meditations*.

If a meditator finds herself in the position of preferring Vipassana, with an emphasis on Vedana and Anicca, but preferring, for one reason or another, not to learn the technique from S.N. Goenka and his Assistant Teachers, there are other methods for learning within the same lineage.

Going back one generation, it is possible to learn from the other students of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Though most of them are getting quite old, some do still teach. John Coleman describes teaching his first 10-day course in the UK in *The Quiet Mind*, for example. Glickman, another student of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, attempts another strategy by laying out a progressive and systematic at-home training plan for readers in his book *Beyond The Breath: Full Body Vipassana Meditation*.

We cannot go back two generations as Saya Thet Gyi did not leave any written instructional material, nor any known authorized teachers other than his student, Sayagyi U Ba Khin. However, we can go back three generations to Saya Thet's teacher: Ledi Sayadaw. Ledi Sayadaw was both a master meditator and accomplished scholar and wrote prolifically in Burmese and Pali. Although his work is often deeply arcane, in his *Manuals of Dhamma and Anapana Dipani* he specifies his instructions for practicing Anapana and Vipassana as a layperson:

A person who wants to practise vipassanā, being an ordinary human being, may not find it possible to put forth effort twenty-four hours a day. He must therefore allocate three or four hours a day and put forth effort punctually and regularly every day. When he starts to practise, he must first overcome the wandering tendencies of the mind and establish mindfulness on the breath. It is only after he has overcome the mind's wandering tendencies that he can direct the mind towards vipassanā.

....

The way to rid oneself of [the belief that is firmly and deeply rooted in the minds of worldlings (puthujjana)] is as follows: When the eye of wisdom penetrates to these four primary elements and the ultimate reality is perceived, such things as shape and form in the out-breath and in-breath disappear, and every time one contemplates them, the deep and firm root of personality view disappears. One perceives that there is in reality no shape and form — no out-breath and in-breath. One perceives that there exist only the four primary elements. Thus purity of view (diṭṭhi-visuddhi) is achieved.

....

It is the same with respect to the other parts of the body such as head-hairs, body-hairs, etc. There exists, on the one hand, the deeply rooted habitual perception of shape and form, such as, "This is head-hair," and on the other, there exist the four primary elements. When these four primary elements are penetrated and clearly perceived with wisdom in the head-hairs, the deeply rooted wrong perception of shape and form will disappear. It will be perceived that the head-hairs do not exist in reality. When it is thus seen, purity of view in the head-hairs is achieved. Proceed in the same way in the case of the other parts of the body such as body-hairs, etc.

Ledi Sayadaw's recommendations in *The Manuals of Dhamma* are similar. To paraphrase: Practice Anapanasati by observing the in-breath and the out-breath at the "point of touch" above the upper lip for 4 to 5 hours a day for a few months. Then investigate the hairs of the head and the hairs of the body.

One assumes subtle sensation would be fairly easy to detect if each individual hair is easily visible to the attention at the *beginning* of one's Vipassana practice.

B. How is Vipassana "Complete"?

There is a finite set of possible destinations for our attention, a finite set of possible meditation objects. These can be enumerated in various ways but all enumerations tend to be equivalent to the six sense doors of traditional Buddhist theory (eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body skin, and mind) plus the seventh sense door of Vedana (sensation) inside the body. Some Westernized variations of this enumeration choose to divide the sixth sense door of *mind* into two categories of *thought* and *emotion*, however, this division will provide a limitation in deeper meditative states where states of mind no longer resemble either of these two categories. Rather than devise new terminology, ever dividing mind states into narrower and more specific subcategories, it makes the most sense to simply leave the sixth sense door of *mind* intact.

The other common complication of categorization is that of *body and body skin*, which is ultimately the sense door at which Vedana arise. Even within the scope of a 10-day Vipassana course, sensation is first addressed where it is most accessible: the body skin. Gross, solidified Vedana (say, internal sensation such as a stomach ache or external sensation such as a feather on the skin) can be thought of as the sense object and subtle Vedana (perhaps elsewhere on the body) can be thought of as the corresponding Vedana understood to be addressed in observation of impermanence (Anicca and

add 8

importance

Sampajañña). This oversimplification will eventually prove insufficient, however, as the sense-door bodily sensations and Vedana of Sampajañña are recursively codependent — you cannot have one without the other. Ultimately, they are “two sides of the same coin”.

course

lection

Having the experience of at least one 10-day Vipassana course, one understands — experientially — the relationship of sense door contact to sensation on the body. That is, when contact is made at any sense door there is a sensation on the body and it is possible to observe this sensation, objectively. In meditation, the most important sense door tends to be the mind. The meditator may go to a quiet, uninhabited place, sit down cross-legged, and proceed to close her eyes and mouth. It is easy to physically stopple the external sense doors. But the sense door of the mind may only become louder on such an occasion. The sense door of the mind is also reflective of the other five senses: it remembers and anticipates contact at the other five sense doors, in addition to its own unique processes of automatic verbalization and emotional habit. Regardless of which sense door is activated, mind or otherwise, a reflective sensation occurs within the body. This is not a point which can be explained in text or conveyed from person to person. It must absolutely be experienced by the individual.

With both this reflective property of Vedana and the finite set of meditation objects in mind, let us examine some other meditation techniques.

Transcendental Meditation (TM) is a popularization of mantra meditation, found in various forms of Yoga and elsewhere. It employs a system of bija mantras, silently recited. In terms of sense doors, five are stoppled, the mind sense door is employed with a remembered object of the sound sense door. Bodily sensation is ignored.

to bija

Anapanasati is the broad spectrum of meditations which employ the in-breath and out-breath as the object of meditation. The breath can only be *felt* and therefore relies on either body-skin sensation or other Vedana. There are variations which place the attention at various points within the body: the tip of the nose, the upper lip, the passage of breath down to the diaphragm or navel, exclusively on the stomach, etc. These all demand the body as meditation object and thus rely on sensation as the door of perception for meditation but, in general, variations of Anapanasati do not extend to the *entire* body. As some sensation on portions of the body irrelevant to the in-breath and out-breath are ignored, such meditation techniques can never be considered complete in the sense that they do not and cannot encompass the entirety of sensory experience. Exceptions do exist. Most notably, Anapanasati instruction by Webu Sayadaw, which directs attention to the “point of touch” above the upper lip but admits that very narrow Anapanasati, when continued for 24 hours per day at length, will eventually lead to awareness of sensation

across the entire body.

Void (Emptiness) Meditations found in some Yogic and Zen schools and elsewhere suggest that the meditator can divorce herself from attention entirely, removing attention from any one of these phenomena and placing it on nothing. Such a technique is unlikely to succeed for beginners and the path provided in Void Meditation teachings inherently begins with a mental “visualization” at any one of the six sense doors: an absence of sight object, sound object, feeling object, etc. Where an apparent void is possible to observe directly, a meditator may have attained access concentration or a jhana. However, attention directed toward a minimum (or zero, if that is possible) sense doors is inherently attention which misses something. By its very nature, it is attention which tries to miss as many inputs as possible. Such a meditation cannot be considered complete, given the vast surface area of sense contact which is intentionally missed.

Sound of Silence / Nada Yoga is a void-adjacent meditation technique taught by Ajahn Amaro and others which, paradoxically, narrows attention specifically to the ear sense door. For most people “the sound of silence” is really the sound of tinitus as the human ear is largely incapable of hearing nothing at all. As Anapanasati may eventually lead to full-body Sampajañña, so may the Sound of Silence. Sayagyi U Ba Khin describes access to full-body Vedana by means of the other five sense doors (other than the body skin) but insists that the body skin is by far the easiest and most accessible to lay meditators.

Vipassana (Cittanupassana) as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw and others is perhaps even less accessible than the Sound of Silence as an alternative sense door to internal Vedana. Cittanupassana, taught without Vedana as the meditation object, tends to embroil the meditator in the objects of gross, surface-level thought and emotional processes. Although it is theoretically possible for a meditator to work with sensation-based Sampajañña through this method, it would seem extremely unlikely for anyone but a monk or nun to do so.

Zazen generally suggests that the meditator open herself to all seven (counting Vedana of the body and body-skin as separate) sense doors, simultaneously. In this sense, Zazen can be thought of as “complete” but from research of lay meditators it seems extremely difficult for the meditator to practice to a point where subtle sensation is felt on or inside the body.

Vipassana asks the meditator, initially, to stopple the five external sense doors. Sit in a shunyagar (empty room or cell), in reduced light, in a quiet and uninhabited environment, with eyes and mouth closed. Since the mind is active, attention is repeatedly returned to bodily sensation: first at the narrowest possible location under the nostrils during the Anapana period and second at the widest possible set of locations — across the entire body — during the Vipassana period. As the six sense

add re
concer

add re

add re
tinitusadd re
discouadd re
cittan

bases are fully reflected in bodily sensation, Vipassana on full-body sensation will (eventually) cover the entire field of sensory, mental, and supramundane experience. An explanation is provided in the context of Spacetime, below.

C. Mastering Spacetime

The completeness of a meditation can only be understood based on three criteria:

- All time: It must cover all of time, for the smallest unit of time
- All space: It must cover all of space, for both the smallest unit of space and the largest
- Continuity: It must be practiced continuously, in every moment of life

In this way, we have a meditation which covers all of time and all of space, for all available time. No “largest unit of time” is requested as time, directly perceived, can only be of the present moment — and the present moment is infinitesimally small by its very nature. In place of the “largest unit of time”, all moments of perceived time are to be captured: a total continuity.

In this section we will examine how, even within the 10-day Vipassana course, the teaching of Vipassana actually covers the largest possible superset of all other meditation techniques.

1. Anapana

Anapana, as taught in the 10-day course, Satipatthana Sutta course, and 20-day course, demands that the meditator make an attempt at *eliminating space*: the attention placed below the nostrils is to become narrower and narrower as awareness and attention become more acute.

Item 3, continuity, already makes an appearance in the practice of Anapana. In addition to narrowing the area of awareness, a secondary goal of Anapana Meditation is to fix the attention to this narrow area for as long a period as possible. Initially, this continuity is understood in terms of mundane time: 5 minutes, 15 minutes, etc. However, it is a natural by-product of unbroken attention that it makes apparent a new, subtler form of continuity. Between each breath, there is the time it takes for the length of the in-breath and out-breath themselves. If we break the in-breath, for example, into three pieces (beginning, middle, end) it is then natural to find that, after one has sustained continuous awareness of these subsections of the breath, that these three pieces can each be broken down further into smaller slices. And so on. It is in this way that Anapanasati teaches the meditator to meditate on **all of time**.

Anapana eliminates space. Continuity is the source of constantly-narrowing attention on space. Anapana is mastery over time.

2. Vipassana

Vipassana is harder. It stops ignoring space and actually adds it back into the equation. You move your attention throughout your entire body (which is the only meditation object you have direct access to) with the narrow focus you trained yourself to achieve using Anapana. As your apparent physical existence begins to break apart, you’ll open up your attention to the whole body, all at once (or as much as possible at once) but even after 10 Vipassana courses, I rarely ever do anything approximating that because I’m quite a beginner.

Vedana provides a sort of backdoor to all contact at the other six sense doors. Direct observation of Vedana can only be of our own body. By observing the entire body and “dividing and dissecting” it with our attention, we eventually observe all Vedana and, therefore, all contact activity at the sense doors. This is all the space there is to meditate on. We are meditating on **all of space**.

Vipassana maintains the mastery of time and continuity demanded in Anapana, adding all of space. Vipassana is mastery over time + space.

3. Continuity

On Day 8 of the introductory 10-day Vipassana course, a new meditator is introduced to the idea of complete continuity: meditating all the time. In the last days of the 10-day course, the meditator is asked to meditate in all four postures (sitting, standing, walking, lying down) during all activities (walking, eating, using the toilet, bathing, washing, sleeping, etc.).

Old student courses such as the 3-day course, Satipatthana Sutta course, and 20-day course emphasize this point more strictly, beginning in the Anapana period. The notion of continuity is expanded to Anapana and the idea of potentially meditating 24 hours a day is introduced. As the meditator begins meditating in all positions, and particularly while lying down, sleep is naturally replaced with meditation. Eventually, the conscious/unconscious barrier is broken even during hours of dreaming and hours of deep sleep. One becomes conscious of bodily sensation, either through the breath or throughout the entire body, 24 hours a day — a true continuity.

Thus, the teaching fulfills our initial three criteria: Vipassana, practiced continuously, is a meditation on all of space, all of time, all the time.

Vipassana is mastery over Spacetime.

III. STRUCTURE: THE REQUIREMENT THAT MEDITATION BE TAUGHT FOR FREE (EXPAND)

IV. CONCEPTS, IDEAS, HELP

- The Cheat Code: moving attention => sati vs. anicca
- Circle Awareness Drawing: how the 5 sense doors shut down
- Learn to sit cross-legged

V. WARNINGS

- This document itself is a hindrance
- Don't get bogged down by "perfect objectivity" or "perfect equanimity" - yes muscles and blood flow

- follow your attention
- Do not use meditation to get high

A. Do not mix meditations

(1. dangers, 2. meditation "doing itself" - anatta)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Preethi Govindarajan for reviewing this paper.

REFERENCES

[1] 5 Senses by Daniel Falk from the Noun Project <https://thenounproject.com/daniel2021/collection/human-body-senses/> Thought by Nociconist from the Noun Project <https://thenounproject.com/search/?q=thought&i=2025873> Heart by Rafael Garcia Motta from the Noun Project <https://thenounproject.com/search/?q=heart&i=807960>

Body by Makarenko Andrey from the Noun Project <https://thenounproject.com/search/?q=body&i=789989> *The Noun Project*.
 [2] Vipassana International Academy <https://www.dhamma.org> *Vipassana Meditation Website*