

'Vipassana' & 'Mindfulness' ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What is the origin of the word vipassana?

00:00:08 Literally, if we look at the etymology, that is to say, the origin of the word vipassana,

00:00:18 we can analyze it into the prefix vi- and the word passana.

00:00:26 Passana means seeing. It comes from the root pas in Pali or pas in Sanskrit, which means to see.

00:00:39 Paschati is to see. And although it might not be immediately evident,

00:00:45 actually that root in Sanskrit, paschati, is related both to the Latin specere, speck,

00:00:59 which means to see. Speck becomes, spash becomes pasch in Sanskrit.

00:01:05 And it's related to the Greek scope, skeptos, that kind of thing.

00:01:11 Essentially, the ka sound of Indo-European can sometimes become a sha sound in Sanskrit.

00:01:20 So that's how you get speck becoming spash, becoming pasch.

00:01:27 And vi has several meanings. It's actually derived from dvi.

00:01:37 And dvi is the same root that gives us duo or the English word two, which is really two, right? T-W-O.

00:01:49 So the dv and the tw are the Indo-European root that means two or separate or apart.

00:01:59 So the corresponding Greek word is dia, D-I-A, which would have been pronounced dia in ancient Greek.

00:02:13 If you look at how dia is used in forming words in English, dia has a meaning of through.

00:02:22 For example, diathermy is to send heat through a person as a healing modality.

00:02:31 On the other hand, dia also means apart or separate.

00:02:36 For example, a diagnosis is to know separately or to know distinctly.

00:02:42 A diacritic is a distinguishing mark, something that allows you to separate similar things.

00:02:53 So not surprisingly, the corresponding prefix in Sanskrit, vi, means those two things.

00:03:05 It means both separate and through.

00:03:09 So literally, vipassana would mean to see separately, but it would also mean to see through.

00:03:20 So to see separately, in my interpretation, is the ability to separate the basic sensory elements of experience,

00:03:31 which I like to classify in terms of touch, sight, sound, feel, image, and talk.

00:03:44 I've described the meanings of those elsewhere.

00:03:48 So vipassana in the sense of separate sensory elements, we can also have even finer separations.

00:03:56 Different flavors of feel can be separated, different flavors of touch.

00:04:04 You can distinguish different kinds of images, images that are of people, places versus objects, and so forth.

00:04:15 So to separate the sensory strands is one meaning of vipassana, to see separate.

00:04:21 But vipassana also means to see through.

00:04:26 That means that once you separate a strand, you intently focus on that strand,

00:04:32 and your awareness soaks into its interstices.

00:04:36 That has the effect of causing it to soften, dissolve, so that it shows you its empty and vibrant nature.

00:04:49 That seeing through or soaking in aspect also has the effect of reaching down into the subliminal neuronal circuitry,

00:05:07 into the unconscious itself, so that there's a kind of trickle-down of clarity

00:05:12 down to the depths of one's subconscious levels of processing.

00:05:21 So I take vipassana to mean the twofold endeavor of separating strands and then soaking into those strands

00:05:31 and literally seeing through their somethingness.

00:05:35 Now vipassana also has a third meaning. The V can be combined with pasana to mean insight.

00:05:46 In other words, the aha or wisdom experience, the change in paradigm that we call no-self

00:05:58 or insight into the marks of existence or enlightenment.

00:06:03 That change in paradigm, that wisdom or insight, is also implied by the word vipassana.

00:06:14 So vipassana means, as I like to interpret it anyway, it means separate, see apart, see through,

00:06:25 and see into your true nature or insight.

00:06:28 And it has all three of those meanings in one word.

00:06:34 So we don't have anything like it in English. There's no English equivalent.

00:06:39 There's no word in English that means separate your sensory experience into natural components,

00:06:46 soak your awareness into those components, and as the result of that you will experience a paradigm shift called wisdom.

00:06:55 Vipassana means all of that as one word.

00:07:00 So in my usage I essentially use vipassana and mindfulness as synonyms.

00:07:10 Now strictly speaking, historically, the word mindfulness goes back to sati or satipatthana,

00:07:16 it goes back to a different word, but really the notions in my way of thinking are essentially the same.

00:07:28 The way I like to set up my definition of mindfulness involves the separating, the soaking into,

00:07:38 which I call the sensory clarity.

00:07:40 Of course, in order to do that you have to have concentration power.

00:07:46 And then the equanimity piece is not implied by the word vipassana etymologically,

00:07:55 but in terms of practical considerations, all mindfulness teachers emphasize this sort of gentle matter of fact.

00:08:04 Sometimes it's defined as non-judgmental. That's not the term I use, but I prefer the more traditional equanimity term.

00:08:14 But all vipassana teachers emphasize that in addition to the clarification aspects.

00:08:22 So that's sort of how I understand the terminology.