

Vipassana Newsletter

Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin

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Words of Dhamma

*Sūriyassa, bhikkhave, udayato etaṃ
pubbaṅgamaṃ etaṃ pubbanimittaṃ,
yadidaṃ – aruṇuggaṃ. Evamevaṃ kho,
bhikkhave, kusālānaṃ dhammānaṃ etaṃ
pubbaṅgamaṃ etaṃ pubbanimittaṃ, yad
ididaṃ – sammādiṭṭhi.*

Bhikkhus, just as the red glow on the horizon foretells the rising of the sun, so too does right view herald the arising of wholesome states.

Anguttara Nikaya 10.121

Right Understanding

By Patrick Given-Wilson

Right understanding has to illuminate every single part of the practice of Vipassana.

The Buddha called it *sammā diṭṭhi*. In Pali, the language spoken in India in his time, *diṭṭhi* literally meant a view or a philosophy. Then as now, many different kinds of philosophies were current. But *sammā diṭṭhi*, right understanding, has nothing to do with any philosophy or intellectual position. Even with great devotion, an absolute and total conviction of the truth of every single word of the Buddha will not liberate anybody. Conviction merely turns the teaching into a belief system like any other, and so it becomes a trap. The Buddha carefully used the word *sammā*, meaning “right”; and *sammā diṭṭhi* only becomes *sammā* when it is practiced. This is the critical difference, and this is what purifies the individual: the practice.

Sammā diṭṭhi is merely the observation and understanding of reality, the practical experience of reality within the physical and mental structure. It requires the understanding of the reality of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to leading to the cessation of suffering. Right understanding is only present when the four are actually experienced.

Initially on a 10-day course, students may come with different philosophical views or religious backgrounds. They may be skeptical. They start with *sīla*, morality, and proceed to *samādhi*, just observing natural breath, to which there can be no objection. Then, as the mind becomes calmer, it becomes sharper and capable of feeling the sensations on the body. At this point Vipassana is given and *sammā diṭṭhi* is introduced, the practice of mere observation, without reacting, with the understanding of *anicca*: the understanding that every single thing within the physical and mental structure is constantly arising and passing. Through experience, this becomes right understanding. Then, in the practice of

Vipassana there is no ignorance, no possibility of reacting, and the meditator is just aware from moment to moment. This is *paññā*, the wisdom of impermanence, which leads on to the understanding of *dukkha* and *anattā*.

Thus *sammā diṭṭhi* is a proper starting point for a meditator. Once it arises, it starts purifying every other part of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Sammā saṅkappa means right thought, without any thought of violence, aversion, hatred, lust or passion. *Sammā diṭṭhi* involves the understanding that any impurity, any such thought is dangerous.

The meditator just accepts and observes the impurity at the level of sensation, and it passes away layer after layer. The whole attitude changes: thoughts of anger, passion and craving turn into thoughts of love, compassion and giving. There is also determination: to walk the path and not to deviate from it.

It is the same with *sīla*. *Sammā vācā*, right speech, involves abstaining from false, harsh words that hurt others, or useless words. *Sammā kammanta*, right action, involves refraining from unwholesome physical actions, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct or taking intoxicants. Simi-

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larly, *sammā ājīva*, right livelihood, requires avoidance of dealing in weapons, poisons, meat, or any trade or profession that pollutes society by encouraging others to break their *sīla*.

Of course, people understand that they may be punished by the laws of a state, or lose their reputation in society. But laws are capricious, and people can hide their misdemeanors from others. People may even fear punishment after death. But *sammā diṭṭhi* is based on the present experience within. It is the understanding that no wrong speech, action or livelihood can be undertaken without first generating great impurity in the mind, and that generating impurity is self-harming. The meditator chooses not to do that, and every aspect of *sīla* develops not out of fear or blind belief but with right understanding. As the Buddha said:

*Mano-pubbaṅgamā dhammā
Manoseṭṭhā manomayā*

Mind precedes all phenomena.
Mind matters most;
everything originates in the mind.

Any action, vocal or physical, performed with the base of an impure mind brings nothing but suffering. *Sammā diṭṭhi* develops this understanding: it is the mental volition that counts, that gives the result. A pure mind inevitably brings happiness; an impure mind, suffering. As the Buddha said, “Be selfish, but know where your real self-interest lies.”

Sammā vāyāma, right effort, is the effort not to generate new impurities, to eradicate old impurities, and to generate and develop good qualities. *Sammā diṭṭhi*, working with sensations, is the understanding of how harmful these impurities are. It is also the understanding of how to eradicate them: how the mind naturally becomes purer and develops positive qualities.

Sammā sati, right awareness, is knowing that any moment without awareness of reality is a moment of ignorance. It is

not just the awareness of a circus performer. It is the understanding that in every moment of ignorance, without knowing what is happening inside, some impurity is generated. With this understanding, the meditator tries to be aware within the framework of the body every moment.

As *sammā sati* develops, and as the meditator progresses, *sammā diṭṭhi* also deepens. At the initial stages, gross, unpleasant sensations arise. With *sammā diṭṭhi*, the meditator develops the ability to be patient, to understand that they will pass. Equanimity begins. Then the stage of *bhaṅga* is encountered: a free flow of subtle sensations throughout the body, a very pleasant, thrilling experience. But it is also a potential pitfall because of the old, lifelong habit of attachment to pleasant sensations. *Sammā diṭṭhi* must be there to remind the meditator that this experience also is *anicca*, that it is not permanent and that any attachment to it is dangerous. Only with this understanding will the meditator progress.

A stage of deep tranquillity then is reached. Again *sammā diṭṭhi* must be there to remind that this experience also is not permanent, it is still within the field of mind and matter. Even now a subtle oscillation can be felt; this is the signal, the message that the experience is *anicca*. The meditator becomes alert, and now *sammā samādhi* starts to develop. Again, even when the meditator becomes very deeply concentrated and absorbed in the object, *sammā diṭṭhi*, the understanding of *anicca*, must still be there. Only then is it pure *sammā samādhi*. At this point a very deep equanimity must develop, with mere observation, without craving for the goal, without attachment to anything. This *sammā samādhi* becomes the *samādhi* of liberation.

In this way, *sammā diṭṭhi*, right understanding, should be present from the beginning to the end, to illuminate every step of a meditator’s progress. As the meditator practices properly, *sammā diṭṭhi* supports the meditator, and is itself deepened by the practice. This becomes a virtuous circle, ultimately leading to full enlightenment.



