

## DILEMMAS ALONG THE JOURNEY

In this article, **Venerable Sujiva** looks at some of the fundamental challenges of meditation practice and how to overcome them.

This is the first of two articles by the Burmese Meditation Master, Venerable Sujiva, on difficulties in meditation practice. The second article, on the Five Hindrances, will appear in Rightview Quarterly's next issue.



## Why Complications Arise

Mindfulness is the awareness of things as they really are. If we are mindful, we will be very alert to the conditions within us and without, able to see whether they are profitable or otherwise, and capable of acting accordingly.

The practice of *Vipassana Bhavana* (insight meditation) involves cultivating intense and uninterrupted mindfulness of the physical or mental process occurring in each moment. This concentrated awareness, when sufficiently powerful and rightly directed, is able to penetrate the thick veil of delusions, liberating one from defilements and suffering.

Why then, some meditators may ask, can complications arise? The answer is simple—one needs to be more mindful. Mindfulness is helpful everywhere, not only in “formal” meditation. Without mindfulness, you can expect challenges. The three categories of dilemmas commonly faced by meditators are:

1. *Conflict of desires and values*
2. *Fears*
3. *Obstacles to Practice*

### 1. CONFLICT

The most common dilemma is the conflict between material and spiritual aspirations. As the Dhammapada says:

*One way indeed, is to worldly gains  
One way indeed, is to Nibbana.*

Intrinsically most Buddhists know that spiritual happiness is superior to purely material happiness. After all, spiritual happiness is the only thing that really counts in the end, but may seem far more difficult to attain than material happiness. Some people strive to attain both their spiritual and worldly aspirations only to find themselves in conflict. Others try to ignore one or the other altogether but still the problem is not solved. In the case of our spirituality, ignoring the cultivation of one's own innermost freedom can only end up leaving one in a less than desirable condition.

How does one maintain practice in face of conflict? A reply can be found in the Kalama Sutta which advises not merely to believe because of hearsay, rumors, traditions, scriptures, or the like, but rather to try practicing and watching, for with practice, faith will arise. So, maybe the best answer is: If you practice enough, things will become clear to you. This was frequently the answer I received from my teacher to many of my questions, and it is a reply that I often find most suitable to give to others.

Another conflict we must not fail to mention is the choice between compassion and wisdom. Some fear practicing *Vipassana Bhavana* because the attainment of the Path will mean that they will no longer be able to take on the Bodhisattva vow to be a Samma Sambuddha. Actually, both Paths are very noble; one is pragmatic, the other idealistic, and if you reach the brink of Nibbana where a choice might be made, the appropriate Path will be clear.

### 2. FEARS

#### *Fear of the Unknown or of Imagined Threats*

Some people may fear that meditation will somehow harm them, that it will “make them crazy.” As a result of this fear, some people either stop meditating or won't even try it. This fear of the unknown can be explained by looking at two key reasons for its arising: wrong practice or serious psychological problems.

“Wrong” practice is wrong concentration, an absence of mindfulness. Absent of mindfulness, the mind will be unwholesome and you will end up increasing your greed, anger, and delusion. When angry, your anger will be, say, ten times amplified; likewise when you are greedy or deluded. A mind like this is unstable and becomes more so if the meditator continues to exercise wrong concentration. So, why does this happen?

It may be that the meditator started off on the wrong foot. People meditate for different reasons. If your motives are selfish, very likely



you will end up more selfish and deluded. The aim of Vipassana is to abandon the defilements (greed, anger, and delusion) through constant and uninterrupted mindfulness of mental and

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physical processes.

If you meditate to become a millionaire or to communicate with unseen beings, I suggest you stop meditating.

Attitude is another important factor to consider. Many people in this goal-oriented world are so hung-up on setting targets that

they get terribly frustrated if things do not turn out according to their expectations. We must be especially mindful not to become obsessed with making progress.

Handling objects in the wrong way can also cause difficulties. In the course of practice, the meditator may encounter unusual experiences that can be fearful or blissful (such as visual images, voices, or feelings). In Vipassana, the meditator should mindfully take note of them then let them pass away. If they persist, the next

step is to ignore them and watch another Vipassana object (such as the “rising” and “falling”). If the object (fearful or blissful) continues to be dominant, one is advised to get up and do some walking meditation.

The big problem here is that meditators can become obsessively fearful or attached to these phenomena causing them to recur again and again; thus intensifying that unwholesome state of mind. When this happens, one must ignore the object and note the mental state till it vanishes, otherwise wrong concentration will result. If the unwanted objects are extremely powerful or persistent, it may be wise to stop meditation until you can get proper advice from a teacher.

### Psychological problems

Deep within our mind lie hidden latent tendencies—both good and evil—that may be accumulations of not only this present life but also past lives. It is not unusual to find some very powerful ones surfacing in the course of one’s meditation. In some of us (luckily not too many), the tendency to break down is stronger than in others. If you happen to be one of these people, be cautious in your meditation. Generally speaking, it is advisable to settle your worldly problems as best you can before undertaking a meditation practice. Meditation is not therapy or a substitute for therapy. In any case, one should inform one’s teacher of any psychological problems.

### Fear of Pain and Physical Disability

Pain is an inevitable occurrence in meditation as in life. In meditation, we use pain to train our mind to become strong and unaffected, to penetrate into its true nature of impermanence, suffering, non-self.

The new practitioner will have to face the usual beginner’s aches that go away with just a little patience. Later, the pain may intensify owing to deepening concentration. After that, one may come to experience its cessation. In more seasoned meditators, pain may actually be welcomed as a sharp object for the mind to hold on to, for building up concentration and mindfulness.

### Fear also arises when one sees too much pain.

This is comparable to the child who will not take medicine (although it is good for him/her) because it is bitter. More knowledge of the Dhamma can help to overcome this. Also, one can bear in mind the many joys and benefits derived from meditating. One can try to ignore the pain and watch other objects. Note the fear when it arises. If that does not work, frequent recollection of the Buddha will help overcome it.

Some people, while watching the pain, fear that they may suffer permanent disability or die. Either they have no actual physical ailments, or they do have them (such as degenerative disks or weak knees).



### Without physical ailments

In such cases, pain will quickly disappear when one stops meditation. One must first note the intention before giving up. However, one should also try to note the fear until it goes away. The fear is actually groundless.

### With physical ailments

In such cases, medical attention should be sought before coming for meditation to ensure that no physical harm will be caused by sitting. In Vipassana, the pain and fear are first noted directly, but when that is not possible (because they are too strong or persistent), they have to be ignored (by watching another object) until the mindfulness and concentration are powerful enough to tackle them again. Many illnesses deemed chronic and incurable have been overcome through Vipassana but it needs a lot of effort and willpower. Vipassana is certainly not to be viewed as a medical treatment.

## 3. COMMON OBSTACLES TO PRACTICE

### No Suitable Practice Place

This is one of the weakest excuses for not practicing. If the place is noisy, “hearing” or “sound” can be your Vipassana object, and one can note “heat” or “cold” accordingly. Also, it is not very difficult to find another place if your first choice is “not perfect.”

### Not Enough Time

That inadequate time can be found for meditation because of other commitments seems a poor and illogical excuse. Surely time can be found (perhaps not quite as much as we’d like, I agree) if we really want to find it—early in the morning or before bed. We can practice mindfulness in our daily activities, being fully alert and composed whatever we are doing at that moment, whether driving, talking, walking, thinking, working, or playing. We can also cultivate other virtues with pure mindfulness, such as the ten perfections of generosity, restraint, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, lovingkindness, and equanimity.

### Shortage of Teachers

There is a shortage of meditation teachers in America. It is perhaps more correct to say that

there is a shortage of qualified meditation teachers. What qualifies a person as a meditation teacher?

Undeniably, a meditation teacher should really know how to meditate and be competent and experienced in showing that way to others. In this context, knowing how to meditate means having had thorough practice and clear understanding, gained through personal experience, of the art of cultivating the mind. Restraint in a teacher is indicative of their qualifications as a result of their observance of the moral precepts. Tranquility should be evident, a non-restless and unruffled state of mind indicating that the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion are weak.

As for being competent to show the way and able to teach effectively, this may be defined as having a truly compassionate heart and being endowed with sufficient knowledge of the Buddhist teachings as embodied in the Pali Canon and its commentaries. A qualified meditation teacher should be able to give precise instructions and timely encouragement so that meditators may progress quickly and securely along the path of purification.

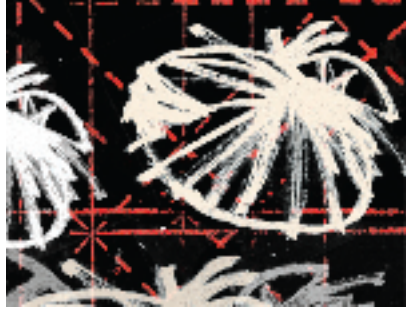
Needless to say, effective communication between teacher and pupil is vital, as is the necessity for sincerity and openness, particularly on the part of the latter. It is also sensible, when possible, to choose a teacher whose temperament blends well with your own. It may be wise to be on the lookout for retreats where you can spend days in intensive meditation, and where you can get a good idea of what meditation is and how to do it. Preferably, initial instructions are given personally. After that, one may resort to regular correspondence as a means of communication in continuing one’s practice.

### Weak Concentration

Another common reason why some people give up Vipassana meditation is the extremely restless nature of their minds. Instead of finding peace in the practice, they feel that they







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are only wasting their time and also suffering unnecessarily as a result of trying to meditate. Such persons should ask themselves:

Have I been keeping the precepts well? Have I been restrained in my daily activities? When strongly indulging in base actions, it is no wonder that the mind is distracted. Restraint, after all, is the foundation of concentration. The thorough practice of mindfulness in daily activities will lead to the ability to concentrate in meditation.

How many hours a day do I meditate? Do I do it everyday, seriously? You cannot expect much if you do not really try. If you have been practicing regularly, sincerely and enthusiastically, with a little patience you will have no problem concentrating your mind.

Have I obtained proper and complete instructions? Have I been having regular interviews, meeting with a teacher? Without proper instruction and follow up, it is hard to have your practice develop and grow. Usually it takes several, sometimes many, sessions with a teacher to gain the proper understanding of how to practice.



## The Four Guardian Meditations

It is understandable that there are people with powerful defilements which makes them give up Vipassana without even giving it a fair try. The four guardian meditations, when done just before meditation, can give support to those people who are very much in need of some peace and joy before taking up the more arduous task of Vipassana.

The four Guardian Meditations are recommended prior to the practice of Vipassana. The traditional Burmese recommendation is two minutes for each guardian (making it eight minutes in all) before a Vipassana period.

### The Guardian Meditations are:

1. *Buddhanussati* – recollection of one or more of the virtues of the Buddha (generates faith and energy)
2. *Mettabhavana* – radiating loving-kindness to one or more beings (overcomes ill-will and dissatisfaction; instills amity)
3. *Asubha* – contemplation of loathsomeness of the body, e.g., the thirty-four parts separately (overcomes lust)
4. *Maranasati* – contemplation on death (overcomes fear of death and instills a sense of urgency)

### Sustaining Practice

Another problem faced by Vipassana meditators is the inability to maintain zealous practice or at least regular sessions, which is crucial for progress. Practice is the effort made. The effort is very much dependent on our faith and confidence. The proximate cause of

faith has been defined as the objects that inspire faith. The Triple Gem is the traditional object of inspiration:

1. The Buddha—or symbols that represent the Teacher, e.g., images, footprint, Bodhi trees or leaves.
2. The Dhamma—which may be represented by the Wheel of the Law, books, or it may be the actual teachings or practice one has come across or undertaken.
3. The Sangha---the community of disciples.

It behooves us to be in constant communication--visually, verbally, and physically--with spiritual objects, activities and people; in particular, with those directly connected with our practice. They help lift us up when our spirits are low and our practice is waning, or when we find ourselves in a rut.

Another contemplation that will help us to develop energy in our practice is contemplation of the eight bases of urgency. These are birth, old age, sickness, death, suffering in the woeful worlds, the round of suffering as rooted in the past, the round of suffering as rooted in the future, and the round of suffering in the search for food in the present.

One who does these contemplations will definitely stir up energy for striving towards the end of suffering.

May you strive on zealously and never stall in your effort until you reach that final emancipation, Nibbana.

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