

The Object of Vipassanā

(One day Retreat March 7, 1998)

Today I will tell you what is the object of *Vipassanā* meditation. What object do *yogis* take when they practice *Vipassanā* meditation? Normally we say in *Vipassanā* meditation every thing becomes the object. Every thing that is prominent or evident at the present moment is the object of *Vipassanā* meditation. But I think that needs some qualification, that everything must be some thing that belongs to the ultimate reality.

Buddhism teaches two kinds of reality: the apparent reality and the ultimate reality. The apparent reality is called concept; *Paññati*. When I say, "It is a man", I am not lying to you. I am telling you a truth. That truth is just according to the convention. In the ultimate analysis, there is no such thing as a man, but just the combination of the five aggregates, which can be further classified as *nāma* (mind) and *rūpa* (matter). Mind and matter are the ultimate realities. But when mind and matter are combined as a being, then we call it a being or a man or a woman. A man or a woman or a being is a name we give to the combination of mind and matter. So a man or a woman or a being actually exists only in the imagination of people. They have no existence of their own. The names we give to people or things and also people or things that are represented by these names are called apparent reality or concept.

From the apparent reality we extract the ultimate reality. So from the man we get mind and matter. Mind and matter are the ultimate reality because they really exist and they can be experienced and they can be seen by oneself through practice of meditation. Concepts are those that have no real existence of their own, but they exist in their minds. We use a lot of concepts in our daily lives, but when we practice *Vipassanā* meditation, we do not take concepts as object because the purpose or function of *Vipassanā* meditation is to see that things have three characteristics: impermanence, suffering and no soul.

Concept has no such things as impermanence, suffering and no soul, because we do not know when concepts come into being and when they disappear. They do not have the three characteristics – impermanence, suffering and no soul. These three characteristics are important to see because only when you see these three characteristics, do you want to get away from suffering. So it is important that you see the three characteristics. These three characteristics are formed only in the ultimate realities and not in concepts. There are four ultimate realities taught in Buddhism –

1. Consciousness
2. Mental factors
3. Matter and
4. *Nibbāna*.

Among these four, a great part of consciousness, and a great part mental factors and matter or material properties are the objects of *Vipassanā* meditation. *Vipassanā* meditation takes only what belongs to the mundane sphere, and not those that belong to the supra mundane sphere. There are types of consciousness that are called supra mundane, that arise at the moment of enlightenment and also the mental factors accompanying them. These are not

taken as objects simply because they are not yet attained by those who practice *VipassanĒ* meditation.

When you practice *VipassanĒ* meditation, you watch your mind, emotions, consciousness, mental states, and so on. Only that you experience, only those that arise in your mind, you can take as object. The object of *VipassanĒ* meditation is first the ultimate reality. Among the ultimate realities, take those that belong to mundane sphere, and not supra mundane sphere. Note however that a person who has gained lower stages of enlightenment, may practice *VipassanĒ* meditation and he could take his supra mundane consciousness as object of *VipassanĒ* meditation. Although he may dwell on the supra mundane consciousness, there is no benefit of getting rid of mental defilements regarding that consciousness, because the supra mundane consciousness is not the object of mental defilements.

A *yogi* takes what belongs to the mundane sphere. In the mundane sphere there are *JhĒna* consciousness and non-*JhĒna* consciousness. *JhĒna* consciousness is that which arises in a person who practices *Samatha* or calm meditation. He takes mostly a concept as an object of meditation to develop *SamĒdhi* on it and reaches the stage of *JhĒna*. At that moment a consciousness arises in him. That consciousness is called *JhĒna* consciousness. *JhĒna* consciousness can be taken as object for *VipassanĒ* meditation. Only those who have attained *JhĒna* can take *JhĒna* as object of meditation. If you have not attained *JhĒna*, you cannot take *JhĒna* as an object of *VipassanĒ* meditation simply because you have not attained it. That is for direct *VipassanĒ*.

There are two kinds of *VipassanĒ* – Direct *VipassanĒ* and Inferential *VipassanĒ*. First you get the direct *VipassanĒ*, that means you put your mind on the objects and you come to see these objects as having three characteristics: impermanence, suffering and no soul. After you have seen the real object and have observed its impermanence, you can make an inference that just as this object I am observing is impermanent and so on, so will other objects be. In that way you practice inferential *VipassanĒ* on the other phenomena which you do not actually experience. Inferential *VipassanĒ* must come only after direct *VipassanĒ*. First you have to see that a certain object is impermanent. Only after that you can infer that just as this object is impermanent, so are other objects. In direct *VipassanĒ* you take the object what you can experience or what you have experienced. If you have not experienced *JhĒna*, then you cannot take *JhĒna* as object of *VipassanĒ*. You can take non-*jhĒna* consciousness and the mental factors along with these types of consciousness as the object of meditation.

Among the non-*jhĒna* consciousness those that arise only in the minds of *Arahants* cannot be taken as object. Those who are not *Arahants* cannot have experienced such types of consciousness, and cannot take them as object. Actually there are just a few types of consciousness in mental factors and all material properties that can be the object of *VipassanĒ* meditation. Among those that are non-*jhĒna* consciousness or among those that are material properties, only those objects that are evident to the *yogi*, are to be taken as objects.

Vipassana begins with what is evident to the *yogi*, what he can observe easily. At the beginning of *VipassanĒ*, you do not try to understand or try to see things that are subtle that cannot be easily seen. You begin with what is evident to you, what is easy to comprehend.

That is one important thing, because if you try to see those there are not evident, you will not be able to see them clearly. And if you don't see them clearly, you don't see their characteristics such as impermanence. So *Vipassanā* begins with what is evident, what is prominent, what is easy to see.

There are two kinds of objects – internal object and external object. Internal means that arises in your mind and in your body that you really experience. External means those that arise in other people and also those that are in outside things like trees and mountains and so on. Although both internal and external objects are the objects of *Vipassanā* meditation, a yogi must concentrate on the internal objects. Because only the internal objects are evident to him. For example, the mind of another person is not evident. You do not know the mind of another person. You do not see the mind of another person. You may infer, "That person is angry" or "That person is happy", but you do not really see for yourself his state of mind. But what is happening in you and your mind, you really know. You know whether you are really angry, happy or whatsoever.

It is important that *yogi* should lay emphasis on observing the internal objects -- own states of mind, own types of consciousness, own material properties, sensations in the body and so on. After a *yogi* has observed the internal objects and comes to know them as impermanent and so on, then he may do inferential *Vipassanā* on the external objects such as mind. Mind (consciousness) is impermanent so is the consciousness of other people and so on. Sometimes such understanding just comes by itself and you do not have to deliberately think about it.

Although both internal and external objects are the objects of *Vipassanā* meditation, *yogis* should lay emphasis on observing the internal objects as much as they can. Instead of looking for or searching for objects from outside, *yogi* should concentrate on the objects that are in their mind and in their body. Looking for some outside objects is actually a distraction. By doing that concentration and understanding cannot develop.

Next the object of *Vipassanā* is the present object. In inferential *Vipassanā* a *yogi* can take the past objects and the future objects as the objects of *Vipassanā* meditation, but first there must be direct understanding, direct observation, direct *Vipassanā* on the object that is evident to him. That which is evident to him is actually that which is present at the moment. So a *yogi* takes the object at the present moment as the object of meditation and try to be mindful of it or make mental notes of it and try to see its characteristics: impermanence, suffering and no soul.

After he has seen the present object, he clearly sees the present object as impermanent and so on, he may do inferential *Vipassanā*. He may infer thus: just as the present object is impermanent, so the objects in the past were, and so will be the objects in the future. That kind of contemplation or comprehension comes to a *yogi* actually almost by itself. After seeing the present object as impermanent and so on, a *yogi* just comes to see that just as this is impermanent so are the others.

What is important for a *Vipassanā* yogi is the object at the present moment. That is because only the object at the present moment can be observed and can be seen clearly. An

object that is passed now cannot be observed. However much you may recall it to your mind, you do not see it clearly, and you cannot see its characteristics. As for objects that are to come, since they are not yet here, you cannot look at them, you cannot see them, you cannot observe them. So you cannot understand their true nature. Only the object at the present moment lends itself to observation, investigation, or comprehending. The object at the present is the most important. And that object at the present moment can be any of ultimate realities: for instance, your thoughts, your emotions, sensations in the body or the rising and falling of the abdomen or breathing in and out. Buddha said,

"Do not let the past come back to you. Or do not go after the past because the past is already passed. Do not long for the future because the future has not yet come. But a *yogi* who is able to be mindful of the object at the present moment or the present moment as it arises should develop concentration and wisdom that cannot be drugged away by wrong views or by attachment. (That cannot be destroyed by wrong view and attachment.)

Buddha instructed His disciples to be mindful of the object at the present moment, not to go back to the past, and not to long for the future. Because they are not real actually. One has already passed and so is no longer here; the other is not yet here. They are not here. However much you try to watch them, you will not see them clearly. And if you don't see them clearly, you cannot see their characteristics. But the present object is different. Since it is here as it were in front of your eyes, you can watch it and you can examine it and you can see it clearly. When you see it clearly, you know that it arises and it disappears. It is impermanent and it is oppressed by arising and disappearing because one arises and disappears and then another arises and then disappears and so on. It is like being bombarded by arising and disappearing. That sense of being oppressed by arising and disappearing is what we call suffering.

We know that we cannot do anything about. We just have to accept it. We cannot make impermanence permanence. We cannot make suffering happiness. We have no control over it and that having no control over it is what we mean by no soul. These three characteristics are important because without seeing them we cannot make progress. We cannot get to the point where we are dispassionate towards all mental and physical phenomena, dispassionate towards suffering. It is important that we pay attention to the object at the present moment and not to be distracted to the past or to the future.

If you think of the future and think of what will happen in the future, you are distracted. When you are distracted, you cannot make notes of the present object clearly. If you do not see the present clearly, the concentration and understanding cannot develop. That is why sometimes people spend a lot of time, may be days or weeks and they could not make progress in their practice. It is important that the object you take must belong to the ultimate reality and the object you take must be the one which is easy to see, which is evident. It must be the object which is in the present moment.

Yogi should understand the object of *Vipassanā* meditation. If you are practicing with a teacher, you just need to follow his instructions. If you follow his instructions properly, you do

not have to worry about what object it is or what you are doing and what object you are taking. If you are on your own, you should understand that *Vipassanā* does not take concepts as object. It takes ultimate reality only as object and ultimate reality means your mind and your thoughts, your emotions and sensations in the body, movement of the body and so on. They are all called ultimate realities.

Among the ultimate realities, we concentrate on what is mundane. And among the mundane, the objects you take are mostly non-*jhāna* consciousness and concomitant mental factors and all material properties. These can be both internal and external. You should concentrate more on internal objects than external objects. Actually external objects are to be taken as objects of meditation only when they force into your mind or something like that (for example, when you hear a noise). You should concentrate on the object at the present moment and not on those that are passed or that are yet to come.

When you practice *Vipassanā* meditation, please keep this in mind and try to be mindful of the object at the present moment. Sometimes it is the breathing or the movements of the abdomen. Sometimes your thoughts going here and there. Sometimes emotions, sometimes sensations in the body. Whatever is evident at the present moment is the object of *Vipassanā* meditation. If we can just pay attention to the object at the present moment, and not go back to the past, not long for or think about the future, you will develop concentration quickly. When the concentration gets developed, we will come to see the true nature of these objects that they are impermanent, they are suffering and they are no soul.

The meaning of the word "*Vipassanā*" is seeing in various ways. The purpose or the function of *Vipassanā* is seeing in various ways -- seeing mental and physical phenomena as impermanence, suffering and no soul. When you practice *Vipassanā*, it is important that you see these three characteristics: impermanence, suffering and no soul.

Sēdhu! Sēdhu! Sēdhu!