

Harmony of Zen and Vipassana (1 of 5)

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Gil Fronsdal

It is my honor to begin this series of talks on the harmony of Zen and Vipassana. This week, I will give the 7 a.m. morning talks. Two wonderful teachers, my good friends from the San Francisco Zen Center – Furyu Schroeder, the Abbess of Green Gulch Zen Center, and Paul Haller, the former Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center – will give the talks in the following two weeks. I have been involved in and have tremendous respect for both of these wonderful traditions. I celebrate their great value. I feel very fortunate to have practiced in both. I think they mutually support each other in all kinds of ways. The chance to talk about the harmony of Zen and Vipassana is a wonderful exercise for me.

I sometimes think of the meeting of Zen and Vipassana as a Venn diagram with two circles that overlap. Some teachers might be positioned in the place where the two circles overlap, so they seem to have very similar teachings. Some teachers might be sitting on opposite sides of the circles so their teachings do not overlap or share much. I do not know how big these Venn circles are or how much they overlap. It may depend on who is defining them, but there is certainly overlap.

Where there is no overlap, there can be harmony and complementarity. Understanding one tradition can help us understand the other. There is a wonderful saying I learned when I was in England: “If you don’t leave England, you don’t really know England.” So if you grew up there, and then leave and come back, you may see it differently. Sometimes being outside of a religious tradition for a while – one that you have been immersed in – helps you to see with clearer eyes something you were missing before. You may understand even better the value of the tradition.

One of the wonderful – perhaps, coincidences – of language is that the word Zen comes from the Chinese word *Chan*, which comes from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna* and the Pali word *jhāna*. It is the same word in different languages. In Pali, *jhāna* refers to states of concentration, the practice of concentration.

Vipassana comes from the ancient Pali word for “insight.” Especially here in the modern West and a little in modern India, the word “vipassana” no longer simply means the insights that came from practicing mindfulness, but it became the name for a technique of meditation practice – the mindfulness technique. Vipassana then became a word that began to encompass the full teachings, culture, and religion of the people practicing it.

So we had this odd new thing that happened in the West, especially in the United States. About three decades ago, we started seeing the expression “the Vipassana tradition.” There were meetings or references to the three traditions – Zen, Tibetan, and Vipassana. I was a little surprised to see Vipassana was now a tradition when it was still a relatively new word to refer to a school of meditation.

In the ancient world, the insights of meditation – vipassana – were supported by *jhāna* (deep concentration). In the ancient teachings of the Buddha, these two came in harmony. They worked together. They were partners. Over time, as Buddhism developed in different ways in India, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, meditation remained a constant in some way or another. There were people, lineages, and schools that emphasized meditation. Zen and Vipassana are two of them.

There is a lot of overlap in what human beings experience when they practice meditation. When most people sit down to meditate, they discover very quickly how out of control their minds are – how much they are thinking and how many obstacles there are to being present. Learning and developing the capacity to be present is very much the same no matter what meditation we are doing. We are developing our capacity to not be distracted and to be with our present moment experience.

As we develop this capacity, we become more settled and calm, which is the concentration factor. As we become more settled and calm, we start seeing more clearly what our experience is, which is the insight or vipassana side. These go back and forth. As we become calmer, we see better. As we see better, we can become calmer, more settled, and present, whatever language we have. Coincidentally, Vipassana and Zen are named after these two aspects of meditation that were harmonious and closely connected to each other in the ancient world.

Generally, there are two ways of practicing Vipassana: one is directed attention and the other is undirected attention. It would be interesting to hear from the Zen teachers if the same distinction can be made in Zen. When I first started practicing Zen meditation, I was told to focus my attention on the breathing and to count the breaths. I did that for years. It was a wonderful practice for me. When I went to Burma, I seemingly did the same thing.

In Zen, there was often an emphasis on feeling the movements of the belly – the *hara* – as the breathing happened. In Burma, they put the attention on the same place, the *hara* area, and feel the movements there. That was very familiar to me. It was the same directed attention as I did in Zen.

Vipassana practice begins with directed attention. Then, as the practice goes along, it becomes more undirected attention. We will see this in the course of the five days I will be teaching here. Many of us in the West teach Vipassana – insight practice, mindfulness meditation – by starting with directed practice. Then we begin to open up the attention to include more and more in the awareness.

We begin with the breathing. Breathing is a wonderful place to calm down, relax, and step out of the thinking mind. We see how much we are caught in thought, and then we come back to the breath – come back and come back. Then we will go to the body, emotions, and thinking. Finally, I will give you a little taste or pointer to the undirected attention of Vipassana. This may be similar to what in Zen is called “just sitting” or *shikantaza*. In Vipassana, there is often a sequential or step-by-step approach to settling in and arriving at undirected attention.

We begin with mindfulness of breathing. If we are practicing attention to breathing – mindfulness of breathing meditation – it “works” when it does not work. It works if our attention stays stable, connected, and continuous with the rhythm and flow of breathing in and breathing out. As we do this, the thinking mind gets quieter and stiller because the attention is no longer going into thinking – and then things open up in a nice way. But there are plenty of times when our ability to stay with the breathing does not work.

Many years ago, I was sitting on the edge of a creek in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The water in the creek seemed to not be flowing at all. It was completely still. I took a stick from the shore and stuck it vertically into the water. Then I could see a little wake forming on the surface of the water where the stick went in. I could see that the water was not still. There was a current flowing. In the same way, mindfulness of breathing is like a stick that we put into the current of our lives. It allows us to see more clearly how strong the current is, especially the current of thinking or feelings we might have.

It is not that we are supposed to stay with the breath and criticize ourselves when we cannot. Rather, to keep showing up for the breath highlights what is really flowing and moving. “Oh, look at that – my mind is really busy. It was busier and more actively involved with thinking than I realized.” Or “I am more interested in food than I ever could have imagined. That is all I think about.”

This is the beginning of mindfulness – to see clearly what is going on. The more clearly we can see, the more choices we have about where we really want our attention to be. Do we want our attention to be hijacked by our neuroses or preoccupations? Or do we want our attention to be something that enlivens us, embodies us, and brings out freedom in our lives?

I would like to think of this as simplicity. The simplicity of just being alive and letting life – our lived life – flow through us.

Thank you. I look forward to being with you tomorrow.