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Samadhi and Vipassana meditation

According to Janakabhivamsa (n.d.), there are significant differences between the Samadhi form of meditation and the Vipassana. Samadhi refers to calmness, tranquillity and concentration, suggesting that when the mind becomes deeply focused on the object of meditation, tranquillity ensues. Emotions such as greed, hatred and conceit are eliminated, since the mind concentrates solely on the meditative object. Through Samadhi meditation one achieves 'happiness' by absorption or access concentration. However, Janakabhivamsa argues that such a technique does not enable the individual to understand 'things as they are'. Instead, the individual concentrates on one object, such as a kasina, and as the mind wanders into distractions, must constantly be brought to focus on the object again. Vipassana meditation, on the other hand, aims to achieve the cessation of suffering by understanding the true nature of mental and physical phenomena – 'things as they are'. Any form of mental or physical process can be the object of Vipassana meditation. Goenka (n.d.) describes Vipassana as 'a way of self-transformation through self-observation', since it focuses on the deep connections between body and mind through disciplined attention to physical and mental phenomena.

If one traces the development of the two forms of meditation in the history of Buddhism, it is evident that Samadhi meditation is not seen as sufficient for the individual to attain true enlightenment. For example, Goenka states that the purity of mind achieved through Samadhi meditation comes from suppression, and likens it to cleaning water by adding precipitant: certainly, the water will appear crystal clear, but the impurities still remain as deposits at the bottom of the container. In order to remove those impurities in the unconscious which Samadhi meditation does not address, it is necessary to observe with insight that which occurs from moment to moment. Samadhi meditation requires that the mind be focused on a single external object, and therefore cannot result in equanimity: the very fact that one is focused on an object means the mind is not balanced. One can therefore see Vipassana meditation as a more advanced form, in which the individual becomes aware of the constant changes in their physical and mental being taking place from moment to moment. Only in this way can one retain awareness of the truth while simultaneously observing its changes.

Clearly the mental discipline learnt in Samadhi meditation is useful as a foundation for Vipassana, but the aims of the two techniques are different. The Buddhist's ultimate aim - the achievement of enlightenment - must involve not only insight into the physical elements of the body, but also the ability to observe mental processes and the generation of emotions. The type