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A Way of Life

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When meditation first crossed the boundaries of Asia and began to have a significant impact upon the Western world thirty to forty years ago, most of the people who were transporters of this cultural exchange were young adults, who were seeking something new that would help to transform themselves and the culture they had been left with. In the 1960's and 70's, World War II and Vietnam still were casting a long shadow over daily life. In the mid 1990's, twenty-five years along into this flowering of cultural exchange, there was a cartoon in the New Yorker Magazine showing a guru sitting in solitude surrounded by Himalayan peaks. There are huge, cartoonishly sharp mountains behind him. The guru is lean and bony, clearly not dining on McBurgers, and dressed only in a loincloth, and with very long hair and a beard trailing below his navel onto the ground. Climbing up towards him, clambering upward by his fingertips, is another cartoon character you could describe as "an aging hippy". He has long hair pulled back in a ponytail, but the top of this head is bald and he has gray hair. He has a very beaten up old backpack that was first seen in Kathmandu in 1971. The guru looks down on the aging hippy scrambling up towards him, and says: "Frankly, I was hoping to attract a younger audience."

That does not pertain today. I am glad to see an audience peppered with gray hair. One of the signs that meditation has taken root in the West is that it is no longer confined to any social, cultural, or generational pocket. People of any age, of any ethnicity, or of any background have found it acceptable and are interested in it.

I would like to begin talking about meditation as a way of life by making it clear that meditation is not a treatment. Of course there are some interrelationships with psychotherapeutic treatments that I will address later. But meditation is a bigger and broader activity than the professional treatment of illness and dysfunction.

Here in Massachusetts we ought to start by paying deference to Henry David Thoreau. This glittering high-rise hotel in which we are meeting today is only a handful of miles from the small town and woodlots and little rivers and ponds he made sacrosanct in and round Concord. Thoreau was one of the first Americans to gain access to the Asian texts, both Hindu and Buddhist, which were coming out of the British Empire in the early part of the Nineteenth Century. Most Americans were unaware of these books and the ideas they contained, but Thoreau was well networked to a few English intellectuals, who shipped these translations across the Atlantic to him. We typically read Walden in high school as the quintessentially American experience of nature and wilderness in the New World. In fact, Thoreau explicitly says he was attempting to reproduce what he imaged to be – based upon his reading – the methods of Indian lifestyle meditators. If you reread Walden carefully you will see that he repeatedly praises Asian literature and the culture that produced it, as exemplary of the contemplative life. He created the sojourn at Walden Pond in order to partake of the Asian experience of a meditative lifestyle. He said that only from his days in solitude near Walden Pond did he come to "...realize what the Orientals mean by contemplation..." that due to his own artesian experiences the water of Walden had now mingled with the Ganges, and that the visions within Indian texts belittled the constricted concepts of the West. Thoreau says in the chapter, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," "I went to the woods to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I

could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.... and be able to give a full account of it in my next excursion.” Without even bothering to justify or elaborate that famous comment, Thoreau poked his walking stick through the fabric of Western thought, and affiliated himself with the Indian tradition of invoking rebirth as an inspiration for living well in this birth. Was he just being playful or ironic?

Inspired by people like Thoreau, about 35 years ago, I returned to India, which I had originally visited as a medical student. I returned to find, study, and practice meditation. At that time I began a meditation practice, which I continue to this day, called Vipassana meditation. My teacher at that time and still today is Mr. S.N. Goenka. The word “Vipassana” is a Pali word, which has now become incorporated into English. Pali is a language of ancient India, a spoken colloquial form of Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the classic literary language, which retained its literary position but eventually disappeared from spoken usage. Pali was a spoken street language and Vipassana was preserved in what was then an accessible tongue. Vipassana means seeing realistically. So Vipassana meditation was differentiated from the other forms of meditation that were common 2,500 years ago in India by the fact that it was supposed to be approachable by the common man and to be entirely realistic. It was not supposed to be in the possession of any ethnic or political group, nor to require priests or professional expertise to be put into practice. It had no religious, philosophical or ideological trappings. It was a realistic meditation for the ordinary person.

I took my first ten-day Vipassana course in India in 1974, and the exact same course that I took then is available today at the Vipassana Meditation center in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. I would like to describe to you how Vipassana is taught today and how this teaching is linked to its ancient roots. Vipassana is taught as a path that is to say as a lifestyle, or way of life. Maybe in psychiatric terminology you could say, “a lifestyle intervention”. It has the atmosphere you find in Thoreau’s writing, in which life is focused on appreciation, intensity and activity.

I emphasize the word, “activity” because to some extent, as meditation entered the Western world, those of its pioneering early students who were mental health professionals kept their meditation practice somewhat closeted. Their caution to reveal that they were meditators – particularly if they were psychiatrists, psychologists, or other psychotherapists - was realistic prudence. Meditation had been stereotyped in the West as a mildly contemptible form of escapism and passivity. I know that these stereotypes actually existed and were not just figments of the imaginations of the early generation of Western meditators...because I myself held them. Meditation was loaded down with a lot of negative baggage. Freudians would tell you that it was merely seeking an “oceanic experience,” which was a regressive wish to fuse with the memory of the mother. Activists said it was self-satisfaction and renegeing on the obligation to improve society. Cynics pointed out how silly and shallow it seemed to them that the Beatles or Mia Farrow purchased meditation like a new marketing strategy for their images. Meditation was seen as a gimmicky product of shyster gurus. People who meditate were said to just sit around staring at their navels. So, like many others, I was leery and skeptical along with being intrigued. I was quite ambivalent. I wanted to learn about meditation but I didn’t want to become an ineffectual person. After World War II and the Holocaust, who could imagine a merely passive and sedative life as being either ethical or survivable? I wanted peace and harmony, but not at the expense of competence or of vivid and responsible living.

Our Nineteenth Century Massachusetts exemplar, Thoreau, was a Harvard graduate, a surveyor, a manufacturer, a businessman, a teacher, as well as a writer. So I emphasize the word, “activity” in order to show that my original concern about being duped or psychologically

lobotomized, which was and maybe is shared by many other people, is 180 degrees wrong. If we think of Thoreau as a local founder of meditation as a way of life, we should be reminded of the appreciation with which he experienced every moment, the vigor and hardiness of his outdoor existence, and the intensity with which he engaged social and political responsibilities. When he died, Thoreau was more eulogized as an abolitionist, a fan of John Brown's courage and commitment to end slavery, an antagonist to the politics of compromise, and a conductor on the Underground Railway, than he was as a literary figure.

A Vipassana course today is always taught in a 10-day format. If you want to learn Vipassana in its authentic, unmodified tradition, you need to be able to take 10 days of your life and go to a 10-day residential course. There may be many reasons why Vipassana requires 10 days of residential learning but I want to focus your attention on the most important one. Vipassana means meditating on reality, but it also more specifically means meditating on reality in an unbroken continuous way. To learn what Vipassana really offers, you need to give yourself time to meditate morning, noon, evening; morning, noon, evening; morning, noon, evening. You meditate when you are hungry and when you are eating and when you are finished eating, when your stomach is full, when your stomach is empty, when your stomach is full again, when your stomach is empty again. You meditate when you are waking up, when you are newly awakened, when you are fully awake, when you are sleepy after lunch, when you are awake in the afternoon, when you are sleepy in the evening, learning to meditate through all the different stages of satiety and wakefulness. This is critical because it differentiates meditation from any artificial, idealized state. If you learn to meditate in a particular way, at a particular time of day, in a particular posture or physical or mental condition, you develop the idea that *this* is what meditation really is. But actually, that would be one extracted parenthesis from your life. It would be an ideal period of life that you had set aside very thoughtfully to meditate. However, meditation on reality has to be unbroken over periods of time because reality is constantly changing. The conditions of your life are constantly changing. If your meditation is available to you only in idealized states, then the very times that you would most like to be able to access meditation, for example under distress, under exhaustion or agitation, meditation will be unfamiliar to you. But if you launch your practice of meditation under a continuous cycle of days in which all your physical and mental states appear in front of you, then your initial learning brings meditation to bear under a wide variety of personal experiences without selecting out and claiming only one state as meditation. You learn to meditate under many of the conditions that your mind and body will present to you.

A ten-day Vipassana course begins with a series of vows. The vows are not taken to placate someone else. No one is going to be monitoring your brain-waves to see whether you are keeping your vows or not. The vows are taken by yourself, to yourself, as an orienting process by which you start yourself off in the right direction. You inculcate in yourself the right attitudes to meditate. The first important vow is that of Noble Silence. Nine of the ten days are spent entirely in Noble Silence. Noble Silence means that you are actually encouraged to talk when speech is contributory to meditation, that is to say, when speech is Noble: for example, when you are discussing your practice with your teacher, or when you need to discuss a management issue with volunteer staff, like having forgotten to pack toothpaste in your suitcase. Noble Silence means that your intention is to be silent with yourself and with everybody else for any other than essential needs. Noble Silence refers not only to speech but also to gestures and all other activities. For ten days you are asked to refrain from reading, writing, computers, telephone, anything that will call you away from the practice of self-observation. Sometimes people say this sounds hard or scary. But to me, if there were nothing else to a ten-day course than Noble Silence, that would be the greatest thing. I emblemize it by saying: "Ten days without having to answer a single phone call!" You finally can tell all the annoyances of modern life to wing it, and you give

one hundred per cent of yourself to learning something new and valuable.

The second set of vows are the five moral vows that are familiar to anybody from any tradition around the world, not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to use intoxicants, and not to commit sexual misconduct, which for the purpose of a ten day course means to be celibate. Whether you come alone or with a spouse or friend, men and women are separated and you live by yourself within yourself. Each person is autonomous. The intention of these vows is to focus all your volition on maintaining as continuous meditation as you can muster throughout the cycle of the days.

And then you take a vow to follow the teaching as it is given, without adding to it or subtracting from it. This is important because people come for ten days and sometime on the third or fourth or fifth day when they might be facing some minor point of confusion or doubt or frustration they may think to themselves, “Why don’t I just start doing the kind of meditation that I have done previously, or that soothing technique I read about, or the prayer that I learned when I was a child,” and of course that could lead to massive confusion. You’ve been alone in the silence of your mind but being given clear and specific guidance and suddenly you start deviating from this guidance and you produce a mental mess, a psychic ratatouille. To prevent this you are asked to take a vow to follow the master chef’s recipe for ten days. This is simply giving the teaching of Vipassana a fair trial to reveal itself as it is, without your diluting or diminishing it in any way. There is enough spice in it already, I can assure you, so you won’t need to flavor it with your home grown garlic.

The course starts with three days of watching the breath. Each day the directions become slightly more specific and detailed so I am only presenting an overview of the general pattern of meditation over the first three days. The exercise of watching your breath reminds me of an episode I had in childhood where you go to a beach and there is a large beach ball and the challenge is: “Stand on top of the beach ball!” The exercise of watching your breath is similar to the exercise of trying to stand on top of a beach ball. As soon as you get on it you fall off it. There is a bit of learner’s frustration in this but unlike the beach ball, which very few people can actually stand on, there is real growth in the ability to watch your breath. This exercise of watching your breath, as an introduction to Vipassana, is not intended to just calm you down. The goal of these first three days is mastery of the mind, meaning the ability to say to your mind, “Do this,” and your mind obeys you. Most of our life we think we have mastery of our mind. If I am asked to give a talk, I can stand up and give a talk, and when the moderator of this morning’s conference holds up a sign that says, “Stop,” I will probably stop. We have grossly apparent mastery of the mind. But in the noble silence of meditation you realize that subtly your mind is running out of control all of the time. When we give the mind large externalizing tasks, at that level it is obedient to our intention; but when we give the mind quiet and inflected guidance, it is not used to obeying delicate and nuanced intentions. This is very similar to the free association that Freud observed in which the mind, when released from overweening guidance, runs fluidly from association to association. The mind is constantly moving from topic to topic, from affect to affect, and though we think we are in control of our minds, actually our minds are in control of us, dictating to us from zones beyond our will or intention what we will next think and feel. The goal of the three days of observing your breath is to be able to give a directive to your mind, “Please attend to breathing,” and have the mind follow that directive. So this three-day exercise often begins with frustration but moves gradually towards an improved sense of self-mastery and self-integration, accompanied by feelings of well being, occasionally even some degree of bliss. Most people get some mild degree of the concentration called Samadhi, the ability to concentrate to the extent that you are temporarily and briefly relieved of the wayward processes of the mind. Thoreau used a beautiful image, that the untrained mind ricochets like a bullet shot in a small

room. You want to be able to lessen that lateral and ricochet motion and steer your mind in line with your intention.

The next seven days of the course are given to Vipassana practice proper and the goal of the course changes. The goal is now to obtain a strong experiential root in meditation as you traverse many states of body and mind, to purify your mind of its ignorance and malice, and to allow its wisdom and good-heartedness to gain precedence, predominance, or even exclusive reign. The goal of Vipassana is to sit with yourself through thick and thin, letting go of the problems you generate within your self, and allowing your original and finest volitions to shine. It is a steaming off of the vegetables, a releasing, and at the same time an awakening. In the old days they said things like “letting the lotus open”. Today we could say: growth in becoming a brighter router in the network of peace and loving kindness that we would like to get linked up to in this domain or across all domains. Vipassana is intended to give you a faster and more powerful search engine to relocate harmony and shared joy in your archived pages, without having a lot of negative advertising or sleazy web pages cluttering your search results. Learn to google “awareness” and “equanimity,” and guarantee daily email updates, by practicing Vipassana.

The courses are taught in a large meditation hall so you meditate in public in the presence of many people. For much of the day you are free to leave the hall and can also meditate in private, either in your private bedroom, or, if your course is at a meditation center and not just at a temporary camp, you may have a tiny private meditation room. So you meditate in public, in private, hungry, not hungry, sleepy, not sleepy, sad, not sad, happy, not happy, anxious, calm, many, many, many states of mind arising and passing away.

A trademark feature of Vipassana as taught by Mr. Goenka and the Assistant Teachers and Teachers of his lineage is the precise and detailed directions of the teaching. It is not at all free-form trial and error ambiguity. The teaching is very exact. On the morning of day six you are taught to work differently than on the morning of day five. On the evening of day six the directions will change again and so on. Each day you are guided to add a new dimension and a new capacity to your meditation. Of course, there are still enormous periods of time in which you are alone, inside your mind, meditating.

The defining feature of Vipassana is to observe neutrally and realistically the mind-body junction manifested in the sensations of the body. I want to focus your attention on why the sensations of the body become the crux of Vipassana meditation. This will help you understand the actual psychological mechanisms by which Vipassana works, as well as why Vipassana is such a useful tool for a lifestyle of meditation.

The experienced meditator – and at the end of ten days everyone is a relatively experienced meditator – meditates on all the sensations of the entire body all the time. But the course builds up to this capacity and this experience gradually. On the morning of day four you take a tiny specific area of bodily sensations as the focus of your work. By day five you have expanded to a slow excursion through the entire body and so forth. Why meditate on the sensations of the body as opposed to any other focus? There are millions of possible ways to just be quiet and calm, observe something and meditate. The importance of sensations is several fold. Partly it goes to the joke in that classic movie of our time, “Annie Hall,” in which Woody Allen attends a very posh party in Hollywood and in one of the background scenes a young man rushes over to a telephone and in a state of desperation, yells in anguish and despair, “I’ve forgotten my mantra!” You can’t leave your body sensations at home. For the rest of your life they travel with you. They are with you in the airplane, they are with you when you wake up at night, they are

with you all day while you are practicing psychotherapy or any other profession, and they will be with you while you are dying. Body sensations are a culturally neutral, non-sectarian, always available, non-religious, non-ideological, realistic focus.

We are temporary aggregations of minds and bodies that live for a period of time and disappear, and meditation that is realistic is based on observing sensations of the body as they rise and fall and change. This is observing what we really are: dynamic, scintillating, ceaselessly transforming aggregates of tiny things.

One of the most important logical questions that is often asked about Vipassana is: “Why not meditate on the contents of the mind? I came here to learn about my mind, to calm my mind, to understand and develop myself. Why not focus directly on the mind?” and of course there are many meditations that do just that. Later on I will explain how we know the way Vipassana was originally defined and practiced. The term Vipassana properly used refers to meditation on sensations of the body. The principle of this goes back to the saying in ancient India that the finger cannot touch itself. If the mind tries to observe the mind, it will always become involved in self-referential chatter. If you try to observe yourself thinking about something, you will think about that something, or if you are lucky you will think about yourself thinking about that something. But you will not be able to observe it. You will become embedded in it or become part of it. The mind cannot observe the mind any more than the eye can see itself. Body sensations are the other part of the mind, the other side of the coin, the observable component of psychic life. For every mental state there is a corresponding physical state, and for every physical state there is a specific mental correlate.

This used to be difficult to explain to psychotherapists. In the past, all of us had, as I had, a very cognitive training, verbal and psychoanalytically derived. But today, due to our courageous colleagues who have worked so hard to study and to treat trauma, we all recognize that trauma becomes imbedded in the body. When people have been traumatized you can say to them, “Look, you have been home from Vietnam for thirty years; there are no helicopter gun ships bursting into fire, there is no enemy penetrating behind American lines here in Amherst, Massachusetts. Why are you so terrified?” The combat trauma veteran, or the woman suffering from trauma after rape, know perfectly well and are in touch with the same reality we are. They know there is no logical reason to fear all day, day after day, for years. But their fear is embedded inside their body, inside the sensations of their body. Memory is in the body as much as it is in the mind. I think as mental health professionals we can all safely say that we live in the era in which mind-body dualism is no longer a tenable theory. Mind and body are two aspects of a simultaneous, synthesizing, multidimensional reality.

When you meditate systematically and continuously on the sensations of your body it is a most remarkable and amazing awakening.

Now here is a point that I would like to emphasize: a person who meditates day after day after day, trying to focus their mind on the sensations of their body, thinking no doubt, forgetfully daydreaming no doubt, but constantly making an effort to return attention to the body and the body only, will, paradoxically but inevitably, be put in touch with mental contents that are revelatory and revolutionary. It is not just trauma that is stored in the body. Wisdom is stored in the body. Calm is stored in the body. Peace is stored in the body. All ideologies are stored in the body. All fears, all ignorance, everything that we call good and bad in ourselves is stored in the body. We are bodies just as much as we are minds. All of us can be located, brought to life, met, understood, in our bodies, if and when our mind perseveringly, sensitively, and continuously travels through the body’s sensations. Where the mind contacts the body, the mind-body junction,

there is always three-dimensional existence: sensations, mentations, and insight.

One of the things I like to tease our research colleagues about has to do with these trendy publications in which the investigators take a group of meditators and give them an MRI or a CAT scan or some other high tech neuro-imaging analysis while they are meditating, and then the researchers try to glean some fame by reporting their new discovery that meditation changes the brain. I think Harvard is one of the places that seems to be most enthusiastic about these alleged research discoveries. I want to ask the scientists, “Where did you think meditation was occurring? On the other side of the room? Inside of the pet dog?” Of course it is in the body. And of course it includes the brain. And of course some parts of the brain, and of the body, will be more lit up by this activity than other parts...for any one interval of observational time. The trouble with neuro-imaging studies is that they are not simultaneously studying the heart, the lungs, the adrenals, the pituitary, the skin, the soles of the feet, the entire integrated organism. If scientists eventually do such a study, they will find that meditation occurs just as much in the soles of the feet or in the adrenal glands as it does in the brain.

When you practice systemic, deep, focused, ongoing meditation on the sensations of the body, you begin to open up to your whole self. You discover your unconscious. This is not merely the Freudian unconscious about your relationships in early childhood, but it includes all the previously unconscious thoughts and feelings that are stored in that body. All of these rise and become exposed at the surface of the mind. Everybody who takes a ten-day Vipassana course has a transformative, catalytic, integrative experience.

There is a great phrase in William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience, in which he refers to “the acute religion of the few”, versus “the chronic religion of the many.” A ten-day Vipassana course could be analogized to an acute religious experience as opposed to routinized attendance at repetitive religious rituals. Of course that is only an analogy. Vipassana is not a religion at all. It is a very rewarding psychological experience.

The ten-day course is hard. It requires discipline, tenacity, hard work, and a little bit of courage that goes with self-honesty. Realistically, we have to say this is not for everyone. Even though it is so challenging, the fact remains that it is extraordinary fun. Not simple playful fun, but the kind of fun that appeals particularly to people who are interested in the mind. It is a Safari into your own psychological Serengeti, ceaselessly interesting and full of unexpected beasts. And the hundreds of thousands of people who have taken such courses in the past three decades under the guidance of Mr. Goenka and his lineage are not exceptional people, not talented athletes or intellectuals, but ordinary, undistinguished, average folks. So you can do it! Even I did.

The ten-day course is not just an experience; it is a reorganizing and transformative experience. In 1988 after I took a thirty-day course in India, one of my friends who is a distinguished literary figure in one of India’s regional languages, picked me up after the course, and asked me, “Did you have any experiences?” In India this is a colloquial phrasing meaning, did you have any supernatural or otherworldly experience? Did you have a face-to-face conversation with your dead grandmother? Did you feel that you entered a different plane of existence? Did you have a manifestation of the God, Krishna, come to you? So I told her, “No. I didn’t have any ‘experiences.’” And she was very disappointed and decided that Vipassana must be a waste of time. Although we have deep, profound experiences in Vipassana, the goal is not just to have narcissistic excitement of the self within the self. The goal is not to make you feel very special, important, a personal favorite of the gods. In fact, experiences that are reorganizing and transformative occur. Their value rests upon whether they are truly transformative. A person who was afraid of something is no longer afraid of it. A person who repressed some of their past

experiences may not be so blocked from that memory. A person who has lost touch with parts of themselves may recover lost aspects of themselves. Most people, most of the time, are not suffering from traumatic sequelae. They simply re-contact the fullness of themselves. That is a gift. Instead of a mind hiding somewhere up in a brain that hovers above a body, we come to feel like a vibrating, interconnected, field, a mind-body zone of instant messaging. You know better who you are. You are more truly yourself. When you look at our Vipassana centers around the world you see that we are constantly expanding our capacity for students. There are Vipassana centers in most of the major countries of the world, throughout Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa. As soon as the center is built it is hard for the student to get accommodation and the spaces are filled in advance. Probably the number one reason for the enthusiasm with which people greet Vipassana is the sense of contact with the wholeness of oneself. You don't meet Krishna on some other plane of existence. You meet yourself and get to know him or her as we really are.

But these experiences are more than transformative. They are also organizing. Your life can now take new shape. You start living something which can be called "walking the path." You can become organized around living a way of life that is informed by Vipassana. Vipassana becomes a compass. As you walk the path you want to know whether you strayed to the right or to the left, and by meditating, you contact the organizing, direction-giving qualities of the practice to which you can return twice a day for the rest of your life.

You have to keep meditating if you want meditation to continue to be valuable to you. You may well become reorganized to meditate morning and evening. Through meditation you begin to experience yourself as the causative agent, as the responsible executive in the design of your life. You are kept attuned to the linkage between thought, experience and conduct. The way you make choices, the way you use your body, influences your mind, and the way you use your mind influences your body. Your life begins to revolve around the realization of Karma.

Karma is a concept that has been greatly misunderstood and even abused. It is popularly misunderstood to mean fate. Karma rightfully means the opposite of helplessness and fatalism. Karma is a term that is intended to awaken you to the power of volitional choice, which is activated in every second. Every second a person is free to choose. You can't choose everything or anything. You can't choose to be a basketball star who earns \$4,000,000 a year. You can't choose to be shortstop on the Red Sox. You can't choose to bring peace to planet Earth. But every moment is a crossroads from which you can walk forward in a different direction. The way you activate choice is your Karma. Karma means volition or active awareness of how you are going to use the next moment. You can define Karma as continuously reactivated intentional living. This sense of option, opportunity, choice and responsibility is the meaning of Karma. Meditation stirs an intrinsic eagerness to meditate twice a day, to take a meditation course every year, in order to keep developing a sense of well being that comes from the wakefulness, the mindfulness, the consciousness of oneself as the guiding light in one's own life.

We have a question about the way in which meditation is entering our Western world, after having been nurtured in its Asian nest for 2,500 years or more. One of the features of the scientific life that is the hallmark of Western thought, and that is notable in the history of scientific development, and which is responsible for the creation of a scientific community, is the ethos that a scientist will honestly refer to the previous publications in their field of study. As scientists, we don't do a study, we don't publish an article, and claim to be the first person ever to think anything like this. No scientific article begins with a sentence: "This is entirely brand new." On the contrary, every scientific article begins: "Here are the precedents, here are the previous studies, here is what the earlier authors wrote." Our integrity, which, our professional journals

reinforce by their publication criteria, is based upon the vigor and authenticity of our search to locate in the literature our ancestral thinkers. So it is not the claim to originality that makes the scientist, it is the recognition of the lineage behind the questions being asked. That is why we have the famous aphorism that is attributed to Newton, that he became great by standing on the shoulders of giants.

For meditation in general and for Vipassana in specific we have a written record that goes back 2,500 years, so if you are referring to Vipassana you want to have some idea of what is in that ancient literature. If someone says they are teaching Vipassana, are they adequately informed about and competently referring to the previous literature? For 2,500 years people have been practicing this practice and leaving documentation about what they experienced.

Historically the first use of the word “Vipassana” is in the teachings of the Buddha. “Vipassana” is the name that meditation was given by the Buddha. By Vipassana the Buddha meant: to observe oneself realistically, continuously, and in totality. Vipassana and the teaching of the Buddha stand between two different things with which they are frequently confused. I use the phrase, “the teaching of the Buddha,” and not the word, “Buddhism.” There was no Buddhism at the time of the Buddha. There was no Buddhism for hundreds of years after the Buddha. Our teacher, Mr. Goenka, has had Pali scholars brought to India from countries such as Burma where the study of Pali is still an active intellectual pursuit. They have completed computer data entry for the Canon in Pali of the Buddha’s teaching. It’s many volumes long. Then you can do a coded search for words such as “Buddhism.” Neither “Buddhism” nor any equivalent of Buddhism can be found in the teaching of the Buddha. There is no “ism” or philosophy that is attached to the teaching. Instead, he taught a method of meditation which would lead to experiences, which themselves become the guide on the path. One does not become a Buddhist by practicing Vipassana. Buddha wasn’t a Buddhist. Mr. Goenka is not a Buddhist. I have not converted to Buddhism. Sometimes people feel leery about beginning the practice of Vipassana thinking, “Well, I am a Hindu, or I’m Jewish, or Catholic, or I’m a staunch Marxist atheist. I don’t want to join any other religion, or a new religion, or one that is against my current belief system.”

So Vipassana should not be confused on the one hand with Buddhism, but on the other hand it should not be confused with New Age trends. We shouldn’t make the mistake of ignoring thousands of years of literature and living tradition. We shouldn’t pretend that we know what meditation is unless we are familiar with the practices and the traditions of those who have embodied it across the generations.

In the teaching of the Buddha, Vipassana is walked as a path and it is maintained by “turning the wheel.” The simile of turning the wheel means that I rotate a wheel and then I walk away and the rotation will stop due to friction, unless one of you comes up and turns it to keep it rotating. The wheel can turn for as long as someone is willing to come up and give it a spin. The rotation of the wheel is always a voluntary activity. Authentic Vipassana courses are always taught for free. There is no charge for the teaching because the teaching comes from the Buddha. Nobody owns it. There is no one alive who can say they invented it. Nobody can claim it as their personal possession. It is like breathing. We don’t charge people for the air, to which we all should have access for free. Although, having stayed overnight in this hotel, I notice that in Boston, it has now become acceptable to charge five dollars for taking a bottle of water out of the in-room refrigerator. So maybe someday we will have to pay to breathe. The city of Boston and other great metropolitan areas will capture us and tag us as we come into town and fit us out with little meters over our noses, and when we leave town we will have to pay a tax for every liter of oxygen we have inhaled. But up until now, breathing has been for free and Vipassana has also been for free.

The Buddha gave Vipassana away for free in the same way that trees distribute oxygen into the atmosphere for the benefit of anyone who can breathe.

There are two things that authenticate the true Vipassana tradition. The first thing is that the practice is in line with the description of the teaching of Vipassana that was given by the Buddha. The lineage must be in line with its origins. And the second authenticating point is the teacher-to-student transmission in which the teacher authenticates the knowledge and practice of the student. So the lineage is transmitted both through written historical records and also through non-written, non-verbal, experiential transmission. It is this reception, transmission, and reception that is called turning the wheel. Today there are Vipassana meditation centers all over the world where this authentic transmission has occurred and where the teaching is given away for free.

The question comes up, “If the centers are run for free, then how can they economically continue?” And the answer is that almost everyone who comes to a course appreciates what they have gotten and leaves some donation. No one will ask you for a donation. There will simply be a table with someone sitting there where donations are accepted. This always reminds me of the Appalachian Trail, that beautiful path through the woods running from the American South, at Springer Mountain in Georgia, to Mt. Katahdin in Northern Maine, and now even beyond. Most of us who grow up in the Eastern United States have the opportunity to walk at least a little bit of this fabulous recreational invention. The motto of the Appalachian trail is, “A footpath through the wilderness.” But in fact it is not a wilderness at all. It is heavily worked on, designed, built, transformed, cleared, redirected and maintained. As you walk the trail, you walk upon tens of thousands of stones that have been placed in front of you by other people’s loving hands as if you were King of the woods and your subjects had come running in front of you to lay out this corridor of granite and gneiss leading two thousand miles through the woods and clearings along the crests of the Appalachian Mountains. Who pays all these subjects? How can this long collection of stone works, trail shelters, and wooden bridges be paid for? It’s all accomplished for free. People have walked the trail, fallen in love with it, and spontaneously been filled with the desire to have subsequent generations walk the trail, pass over the hills, and drink from the streams. Vipassana is a two thousand five hundred year old invisible Trail, that is maintained by travelers who have had the experience, and who are filled with the wish that others have the opportunity to sweat, toil, step out onto promontories that reveal vistas, and breathe the fresh mountain air. Having walked the path, they rotate the wheel. They have preserved and laid out in front of you the long trail for you to walk for the rest of your life, where you will always be free to wake up to an adventure and to a mountain-top. Your trail guides can give you a guarantee. If you really walk the path, you are guaranteed to want to donate your time and energy to trail maintenance, to insure that others will get the same opportunity. It’s that gratifying.

The Appalachian Trail is built in a world of rocks and earth and roots. The path of Vipassana is built in an atmosphere. This is a realm of peace, harmony, non-violence and empathic relatedness with all other living beings, human and non-human. On the one hand, meditation is not a special, magical state of mind, and is the capacity to choicelessly observe the sensations that underpin all states of mind. On the other hand, Vipassana gradually prunes those states of mind that are counterproductive to and antagonistic towards the ethos of neutral and equanimous observation. You take out the weeds and find a crop of inner peace.

Non-violence does not mean that a Vipassana meditator needs to take a vow of pacifism, because there are many moral complexities to life. I don’t see anyone who is living now or who has ever lived who has the correct answer to each and every particular moral conundrum that we face in our life on earth. The most poignant example of this is the American Civil War. If you say

the Civil War was horrible, it killed half a million people, no one should have fought, the soldiers should have resisted, Abraham Lincoln's military draft should have been resisted, then you are saying that you favor the perpetuation of slavery, an institution that was not only not dying out, but was expanding in power, importance, and territory. Obviously if you were a slave you would not be on the same side as the draft resisters. On the other hand, if you embrace the war then you are embracing battles like Gettysburg. During the United States war in Vietnam, approximately 50,000 Americans were killed in combat over a period of about a dozen years. At Gettysburg approximately 50,000 Americans were murdered in three days. So what's the right answer? There is nothing in the teaching of Vipassana that is going to coerce you into making a reduction of reality into one side or another of any vast or overwhelming social issue. Part of the enduring genius of the Buddha's teaching is that he gave ethical guidance without pinning it to situational particulars. The teaching is like geometry class. The textbook gives you the theorem, and you have to apply it to various problems. But the goal of Vipassana is unambiguously pointed towards a lifestyle in which you continuously seek out what you perceive to be the most non-violent option in the circumstances in which you are actually involved.

As one joins the lineage based upon the Pali Canon and the teaching of the Buddha, as one joins the lineage as marked by receiving the transmission for free from the teacher who received it for free, as one turns the wheel by maintaining the centers, by helping to run courses, then one also enters into a neighborhood in which people are trying to live in an atmosphere of harmony, loving kindness and expansive good wishes. I once looked for an aphorism to capture this ethos of Vipassana and I came up with the expression, "You can never speak up too often / for the love of all things." My wife has come up with a simpler slogan. She says, "Keep on turning."

A feature of Vipassana that is worthy of an essay in itself is the complexity of psychological actions that the meditator awakens inside of him or herself. As psychotherapists, our curiosity is piqued: "How does meditation really work at the psychological level?" Meditation sounds very simple. You sit there, close your eyes, trying to neutrally observe your bodily sensations which will also make you effortlessly aware of their mental correlates, and you try not to react to whatever is happening in your mind and body, but just to observe it as it is, and you try to do this continuously over hours and days with some minor variations that you are taught, to keep the technique dynamically related to the different types of mental and physical states that you might be observing at any point in the continuum of time. The goal of all this is to become a peaceful, harmonious citizen, who is at ease with him or herself, and who brings some harmony and well being into their society and culture.

In spite of the unifocal intention and effort, multi-focal psychological catalysis is engendered by Vipassana. Many changes are being stimulated as you sit. There are multi-faceted interactions between the human psyche and the activity that we call Vipassana. In another essay I've described these psychological, developmental attributes of Vipassana in detail: "Beyond Mindfulness: Complex Psychological Development Through Vipassana Meditation." Here I will highlight just a few of the salient psychological events.

The first thing is that Vipassana is values based. It is neutral observation but it is not neutral in cultural valence. It is an education that contains a didactic root. There is an educational inculcation to value a morally preemptive lifestyle. One is taught to live by an attitude exemplified by the traditional five vows, which echo the Ten Commandments or any other practical, social, ethical way of life. The vow not to commit sexual misconduct during daily life, outside of a meditation course, means that sex should be a loving bond which holds together an interpersonal relationship, giving continuity of affection to the partners, and providing a node of

stabilizing amity within society. There is no point in embracing Vipassana if you don't share these five moral attitudes. Or if you do commence Vipassana practice with total skepticism towards the five moral vows, your meditation practice, though based on neutral observation, will not allow you to remain cynical. If you keep practicing, your meditation will rotate you on the carousel to capture the ring of these values. There is no way that you can walk the Appalachian trail while harboring a desire to become a logger like those who feel: "If you've seen one tree, you've seen 'em all." There is no way that you can walk the path of self-knowledge, realism, and appreciation, without treasuring the psychological healing and social contribution of ethical rectitude.

A second psychological development that Vipassana brings to bear is cognitive restructuring. Vipassana does not tell you what to think. It just tells you to observe. What you will observe is the adaptations and mal-adaptations of certain cognitions. Without anyone telling you how to ride a bicycle, with no one standing behind you to yell at you, "Lean a little to the left, now quickly lean a wee bit to the right," after a few tries of trying to learn how to ride a bicycle, on your own, it becomes intuitively obvious how to ride a bicycle in the upright position by balancing this way a little bit and by balancing that way a little bit. It is an automatic education because if you don't listen to the intuitive attunement of your body to the upright position, you fall off the bicycle. Vipassana is similar to riding a bicycle. Neutral observation generates an intuitive reinforcement system for producing states of self-awareness, harmony, and peace.

The Buddha addressed cognitive restructuring through Vipassana initially by saying that one has to work hard. Meditation is not merely relaxation. Yet one cannot work hard without being relaxed, because one cannot sustain meditation without relaxation. So there is a dynamic balance, like riding a bicycle, between ardor and relinquishment of effort. The Buddha, lacking in bicycles, used the simile of a stringed instrument. We could say in modern imagery it is a guitar string. If it is tuned too tight your notes are sharp. If it is tuned too low the notes sound flat. You have to learn to tune your E, A and D strings to the proper tension. So as you sit still trying to neutrally observe your sensations, you are actually cognitively restructuring your sense of effort, to attain vigor with self-acceptance, focus with ease.

In a similar manner, many other cognitive restructurings occur. If you enter a lifestyle in which you are trying to be alert, harmonious and peaceful through twice daily meditation and through annual meditation retreats, there is no point in augmenting or maintaining anger, hatred, or avariciousness in your mind. Your meditation itself will create a feedback loop to de-condition those states of mind, which make you unhappy or uncomfortable with yourself, and to reinforce those states of mind which leave you feeling integrated and eased. Meditation over time will spontaneously induce a natural attrition of negativity and an unforced growth of positivity.

A third psychological, developmental contribution of Vipassana is that it is a social and communal activity. Of course one is constantly practicing on one's own in the privacy of one's own domestic nook. But meditation comes from other people. It came from the Buddha. For thousands of years it was passed on freely from person to person. Today there are hundreds of thousands of people around the world practicing Vipassana. Meditation is a journey from individual encasement to communion. The image of the stone icon of the Buddha sitting cross-legged is not an accurate representation of the real life of Vipassana. The stone icons that have become associated with the teaching of the Buddha became popular only long after his death as his teaching was becoming lost, and have contributed to a negative stereotype. The Buddha was a physically active, long distance walker, a conversationalist and a social being, who reiterated that the Path is friendship with others on the path. No matter how experienced you think you are, you can always benefit on the trail from the feedback of other backpackers who can clue you in to which springs are contaminated or pure, or which trail shelters harbor mice and porcupines who

want to savor your gorp in the night. You walk the path alone, by the power of your own quadriceps, your own leg muscles, but those scouts who first blazed the trail, and your fellow hikers...that friendship around the campfire...even the Buddha cherished those friends-along-the-way. Vipassana has no membership roles or dues, but it brings you into contact with a human community with whom you share an ultimate concern.

A fourth psychological development of Vipassana meditation is the amount of insight into oneself that it engenders. Even one's first Vipassana course brings a transformative awareness of and integration with the contents of one's body and mind. The sensations of the body are a storehouse of mental contents and mental contents are a pictorial representation of the sensations on the body, and both express the energy which is encoded and stored in the vehicle we call "life." We are the activity of atoms, molecules, and cells; we are the ripples of physics, chemistry and biology. Body sensations are the crossroads where all of Vipassana connects. The thing we call our self is a process embedded in the physics and chemistry of the universe. It is from deeply realizing this that one gains insight into who one really is.

So Vipassana is a practical, empirical, non-Buddhist path of self-awareness, self-development, and community participation, a meditation upon the constantly changing and transitory nature of all the phenomena in the world that one calls oneself. Every thought you have seems so important. When you are fifteen you are bent out of shape about something your pack of friends whispers, or some hint in a girl's speech. You agonize over these apparent thunderclaps. When you turn forty, you no longer remember that these things ever occurred. Someday your entire life will not be remembered by you. Everything will pass away. As one works with this perspective, one develops a sense of what is in fact of enduring value. The most enduring values are those that far exceed and transcend the confines of the individual self. We can say that there is a religious or spiritual dimension that is cultivated in Vipassana. We realize that every person is the same as every raindrop, every wolf, and every delphinium in the garden. We share with all living things the dimensions of life and death. Every living being is the child of those two ancestors. In at least those two dimensions, all beings are kin. Our personal life is very transient. There is no way to satisfy the background ill ease of death without deeply confronting impermanence and provoking a satisfactory retort to its initial nihilistic innuendo. You are set up to answer the question about what life means given the pervasiveness of impermanence. A new sense of reality about the world is experienced and internalized by all Vipassana meditators.

For this development we could use the word, "ecstasis" from which the word ecstasy is derived, and which means "ec," outside of, and "stasis" standing, standing outside your self. This is not just the observing self that one gains through psychotherapy, where one is able to observe that one is angry at one's partner, and without acting on that anger one tries to observe, understand and augment insight into it. The ecstasies of meditation is standing outside of all of oneself entirely, standing outside of one's culture entirely, standing outside of one's historical era entirely, observing the impermanence of everything. What comes up, what one values and lives for after this vaulted standing outside, is unique to meditations that bring you to deeper experiences of the impermanence of all of your thoughts, feelings, and body. Within all of the world that you can directly contact, your own mind-body, there is no absolute reality you can hold onto. The material universe is made of different grades of sand. Vipassana can be said to steer its practitioners towards transcendence.

"Ecstasis" and "transcendence" as I am using these words do not mean an excited belief in some historically parochial ideology, some castle in the sky. Ecstasis and transcendence are loci of balance. They aren't forms of excitation. They are about standing back, watching, becoming cool and letting go. There is a great faith impregnated within the mere act of

meditating. You meditate with earnestness because you have faith that there is some value to the enterprise. You have faith enough to work so hard at meditation that it carries you to new insights, new understandings, new shores.

Everyone knows that penguins are birds who have specialized in swimming at the expense of flight, but did you hear about the flock of penguins standing on an Antarctic ice flow, who looked up to see one of their friends flying over head? He yelled down to the other penguins, “We just haven’t been flapping hard enough!”

Practicing Vipassana is a way of getting up. You stand outside of and transcend, you are above beliefs. You realize that all beliefs are human fantasies, yet you retain faith in the ultimate value of your life and of meditation, because it gets you high. Not excited high, not delusional high, but perceptive, highly realistic. Anything you believed in, anything you hold to be true, is merely mental content inside of one little mammal that is destined to disappear from this planet. Vipassana is a journey beyond verbal, visual, conceptual, emotional, and ideological belief. You extract yourself from old preconceptions.

The Buddha called his path “a journey beyond views.” You orient by direct experiential participation, three dimensional, irreducible meditation and living. You come to understand that the path is inside you. You are the path. You are the wheel that is turning. You keep walking, beyond beliefs, views, religions, definitions, words, into a moment by moment reality that is opening outward. We used to say in psychiatry that it is process, not content, oriented. Reality is what is unfolding. Its ultimate nature is outside any thing. It is not containable within ideas. It cannot be grasped. You open the doors, you let go of the preconceptions, and you keep on watching and walking.

I’m still a psychiatrist and I don’t want to get thrown out of my profession! So I have to mention the words, “outcome measures.” Let’s be as practical as clinicians can be, and talk about results. The teaching of the Buddha is definitely progress oriented. But as I hope is now very clear to you, the psychiatric treatment of anxiety and depression is not the goal and is not among the true outcome measures of Vipassana. The image of a path is about going forward, getting further away from the starting point of ignorance, and approaching a goal. The goal is “Nibbana,” meaning, not wind, not words, not things, not ideas, not sand grasped by and slipping through your hand. Liberation. Beyond. Given this transcendent goal, what can a practical, worldly, professional affirm as a valuable result?

The path brings benefits as soon as it is activated, because starting out on the path is itself part of the goal. So a first outcome criteria is continuity, walking, treasuring and activating morality, meditation, and realization, becoming the path rather than merely complying with it, spontaneous identification and participation, going forward, starting the adventure again every day. Spontaneous means that you are not just doing it because a meditation teacher told you to do it. As you learn to observe yourself it becomes obvious to you: “These are the things that give me health and life.” Meditation becomes integral with the passage of your days. Your days are intervals within which your meditation reappears and flourishes. You stop meditating because someone told you it is good for your blood pressure. You meditate because you feel: “This really helps me, essentially.” You follow the organic feedback of a process-oriented life of positive volitions, and fresh takes.

We have already considered a set of psychological actions within Vipassana that are both intrinsic to it and also constitute valuable outcomes, such as self-integration, self-insight, cognitive restructuring, social affiliations, ethical positions, and embrace of change.

Another entire arena of outcome criteria is a collection of developments I call spiritual emotions. This is like a garden you plant. You cultivate aromatic and beneficent modes of being, like herbs. Meditation makes it obvious to you – “we hold these truths to be self-evident - ” to inculcate, augment and relate through these emotions as much as you can, as well as you can. The spiritual emotions are those that are maximally congruent with the life of meditation, and they will eventually hover over your life like gulls above the waves. The practice of meditation attracts them, brings them home, facilitates them and is facilitated by them, in a feedback loop. A feeling of generosity...a lifestyle of generosity: you were given all of this teaching, courses, Centers, as charity. You were the welfare recipient! When it comes to meditation, you were the stray dog who was petted and given a bed. Maybe meditation Centers are not very different from animal rescue shelters. So naturally you want to feed some other strays from your old pack. A lot of the good things in life only exist when they are in transit, being given away, particularly emotions. Meditation is always taught for free for this reason, that its affectual basis includes the activity of handing it out, a Potlatch. Then there is gratitude; you are in debt to a long chain of donors and yet they are refusing to collect interest due. So you live in debt, not burdened, but grateful, appreciative, inspired by the example.

And then the feeling of reverence, not simply reverence for the symbols of a religion, just walking through the world with a receptivity for its heroes and flowers. Some of the aspects of this world are like clouds, so ethereal and impermanent, yet we are elevated by looking up at them. The world is transitory and filled with decay and death and yet you have set out on an open road that provides idealism and optimism rooted in factuality and realism. Some long-nurtured organization of events has launched you on a high road of wisdom, and you see the world as containing a path you revere, beings you revere, your own private interior gallery of founding exemplars like the Buddha or Thoreau or hummingbirds.

The Buddha taught a specific exercise to generate the feeling of loving-kindness, and the ability to do so is considered to be the premiere outcome measure of Vipassana. A feeling of loving-kindness: this is similar to when the Buddha saw a gang of kids trying to kill a cobra and he asked them, “Why are you attempting to kill someone who is only trying to be happy just like the rest of us?” Meditation is similar to music because if it stays inside you it doesn’t exist. Meditation is only a rehearsal for the path, and loving-kindness is one of the cherished concertos of the concert season.

The last spiritual emotion that I have time to mention is awe. We exist within a season of an opportunity. We can awaken our consciousness and distribute love and compassion in showers the way a cottonwood tree sheds cascades of its floating white seeds.

I hope you won’t wander off the path into the roadside weeds where meditation gets tangled with healing. Healing is very important, another critical human enterprise, which we all care deeply about and from which all of us earn our living. But its methods, reimbursement systems, certifications, kinds of relationships, and values differ. Its goal differs. You cannot preserve the generation-spanning beauty of the great trail if you sell pieces of it to real estate developers for malls or even for hospitals. It is inconceivable that the trail crews on the Appalachian Trail would market their volunteerism as a new kind of mental and physical treatment, although there is little doubt that hiking is good for the mind and body. Maybe you have heard about the young Emergency Department doctor who became confused about the proper proportions between healthy living and ultimate concerns. One day a man who had crushing chest pain radiating down his left arm was rushed in an ambulance to the Emergency Department. The man’s wife raced to the hospital behind the ambulance, but could not keep up with it, and so she arrived at the ED about ten minutes after the ambulance, where she got the

shocking news that her husband had just died. The good young doctor tried his best to console her by telling her: “Please, don’t be so upset. Don’t cry. In the ten brief minutes between you husband’s arrival by ambulance and his death, I had ample time to give him one last, vigorous, up-to-date medical lecture on the importance of diet and exercise.”

I hope all of you will have the opportunity to walk the grand old trail, the path that crosses over the canyons of time and cultures, that leads up the mountains to vistas, but then, unlike any other trail, climbs higher than views, “the path beyond views,” to a pure summit “beyond the wind.”

Around the world a 2,500 year-old multi-center field trial of Vipassana meditation has been evolving, and as hundreds of thousands of people walk the path and rotate the wheel, I am an interested participant-observer, curious to see what its impact will be upon the higher mental health of the human community.