



## ***Vipassana Meditation as a Path toward Improved Management Practices***

**Joan Marques**, Woodbury University  
**Satinder Dhiman**, Woodbury University

### **ABSTRACT**

*In a 2009 Professional Development Workshop (PDW), sponsored by the Management, Spirituality and Religion Program of the Academy of Management (AOM), three Management Professors facilitated a session, which focused on the potential role and applications of Vipassana meditation in management practices. After a general overview of meditation, the facilitators briefly reviewed the history of Vipassana and reflected on their experiences with this form of meditation. They subsequently presented a short breathing exercise technique and a demonstration of the practice of vipassana, followed by attendees' actual participation in these meditative practices. The participants in this session, 20 scholars from Universities in Europe, Australia, Asia, North- and South America, then considered the possible effects of engaging in this meditation for management practices. This short paper reviews the session and its findings.*

### **Introduction**

Meditation has been around for many centuries. Different forms of meditation have been linked to different religions, philosophies, and era's. Most recently, we can recall the sixties and the flower-power era, in which meditation was considered a part of being free-spirited and untainted by societal pressure.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawned, members of the U.S. workplace became increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, and an enduring, surging call toward greater meaning at work and outside, presented itself. Workforce members increasingly felt that something was wrong with the picture of a handful of wealthy business owners and a large number of continuously struggling workers. The trend of workplace spirituality had set in. This trend was fueled by a number of factors such as a greater influx of women in the workplace, increased numbers of divorces, growing diversity, the explosion of the Internet, and, with that, increased exposure to other cultures and traditions. With the many change factors, U.S. workers also started realizing that their Judeo-Christian-based, capitalistic values, may not have been able to provide all the answers, and that some horizon expansion might be necessary to restore the growing imbalance between the affluent and the underprivileged. General interest in Eastern traditions increased, especially in Buddhist meditative prac-

tices, even though the absolute number of practicing Buddhists remained small. With this interest came the awareness of mindfulness, and the ancient practices in which Buddhists engaged, including the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path as a segment of the Four Noble Truths, and Vipassana meditation as a segment of the Noble Eightfold Path.

In this short paper, we will review the advantages of Vipassana meditation, as they were presented by 20 management scholars from Universities in Europe, Australia, Asia, North- and South America, during a workshop at the American Academy of Management.

### **The Institute Called Meditation**

The concept of meditation has always been considered a marvel to human beings. Many forms of meditation exist, varying from mantra meditation to guided meditations, that derive from traditions as wide and diverse as the globe. Each form of meditation has, to a higher or lesser degree, proven itself for a selected group of practitioners. Meditation has been associated with yoga, with healing practices, with hypnosis, and many other similar practices. Yet, it has been around for many centuries, and the two forms of meditations that seemed to have bridged the longest span of time are Samatha or Tranquility and Vipassana, or Insight meditation.



## **Two Forms of Meditations: Samatha and Vipassana**

Meditation constitutes the essence of Buddhism, the very foundation of Buddhist practice. Meditation is to Buddhism what Prayer is to Christianity (Conze, 1959, p.11). There are two main types of Buddhist meditation:

1. *Samatha Meditation*: the development of serenity or calm, and
2. *Vipassana Meditation*: the development of insight.

Calm meditation aims to provide the mind essential clarity and makes the mind serene, stable, and strong. By preparing the mind to 'see the things as they really are,' it serves as a necessary foundation for Insight meditation. Together, Calm and Insight meditation form the Buddhist path leading to the realization of final awakening or enlightenment. Explaining the role and relationship of Calm and Insight meditation, Peter Harvey (1990, pp. 253, 255) has observed: "Calm meditation alone cannot lead to *Nibbana* (Sanskrit: Nirvana), for while it can temporarily suspend, and thus weaken attachment, hatred, and delusion, it cannot destroy them; only Insight combined with Calm can do this....Calm 'tunes' the mind making it a more adequate instrument for knowledge and insight....Insight meditation is more analytical and probing than Calm meditation, as it aims to investigate the nature of reality, rather than remaining fixed on one apparently stable object."

### **Vipassana**

Vipassana is often associated with Buddhism, because it was the meditation in which Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha) engaged when he attained enlightenment. However, it is very likely that vipassana had existed and was practiced before the Buddha rediscovered it 2600 years ago.. The Buddha may therefore be seen as one of the most famous ambassadors and developers of vipassana meditation and its healing effects..

*In more detail.* Many sources refer to vipassana as a predominantly Theravada Buddhist prac-

tice, even though it is also increasingly practiced by Mahayana Buddhists. Wrye (2006) explains, "In vipassana meditation, a southeast Asian Theravada system of mindfulness techniques that are intended to lead to an experience of the emptiness of self, attention is drawn to the breath and to every object of consciousness without preference or selection, as in free association" (p. 730). Bercholz and Kohn (1993) perceive the value of Vipassana for Mahayana Buddhism and assert that, in Mahayana Buddhism, Vipassana is seen as "analytical examination of the nature of things that leads to insight into the true nature of the world – emptiness" (p. 327).

While, as mentioned earlier, several sources assert that Buddha *re-discovered* vipassana as a path to enlightenment, Rahula (1959) claims that Buddha *discovered* this form of meditation, which stands for "insight into the nature of things, leading to the complete liberation of mind, to the realization of Ultimate Truth, Nirvana" (p. 68). Snelling (1991) reflects on Buddha's journey toward enlightenment: "[W]ith a mind fully clear and concentrated, he began to practice vipassana or insight meditation and thereby gained certain special kinds of knowledge" (p. 27). Snelling subsequently lists these special kinds of knowledge: "1. He remembered many former existences. 2. He gained knowledge of the workings of karma. 3. He gained knowledge of the destruction of the asavas, the 'cankers' or 'taints'" (p. 27).

Geshey Ngawang Dhargey (1974) explains that the teaching of vipasyana is divided into three sections:

1. Establishment of the concept of non-self-existence of personality
2. Establishment of the non-self-existence of all phenomena.
3. The method of developing Vipasyana (p. 163).

The Technique of Vipassana (As taught in S. N. Goenka Courses)

Basically, the Vipassana Mediation has the following 4 progressive steps:



1. *Slow Scan*: Moving attention slowly from top of the head to the tip of the toe and back, part by part, piece by piece.
2. *Free Flow Sweep*: Sweeping attention freely *enmasse* upwards and downwards where subtle sensations are experienced and going back and observing those areas that have solidified coarse sensations or the areas that were initially left blank.
3. *Spot Check*: Being able to quickly take your attention to any spot (of the size of a finger tip) and move back and forth. Try only 4-5 spots checks and then go back to normal scan and sweep.
4. *Penetrating and Piercing*: First three steps involved scanning basically the external part of the body (skin area). The attention during these three steps moves vertically up and down. Penetrating or piercing is the internal scan under which we move our attention inside the body areas, so to speak, left to right, right to left, front to back, back to front. *This is highly advanced technique and is reserved for advance level practitioners who work under the close guidance of an experienced teacher.* It was hinted that such advanced techniques are explained during the longer duration courses, courses that run for 20 to 30 or to 60 or even to 90 day. meditation retreats.

During the practice of all of these techniques, remembering the universal law of impermanence, always maintain perfect equanimity. Do not generate new sankharas or mental tendencies by reacting with craving or aversion to pleasant sensations or unpleasant sensations. It is the old habit of our unconscious mind to react with craving to pleasant sensations and to react with aversion to unpleasant sensations.

If we react to unpleasant sensation(s) as we sweep or scan, we not only create new sankharas but also start multiplying the effects of the old sankharas of aversion. The moment we react to pleasant or unpleasant sensations with crav-

ing or aversion, we start multiplying the old sankharas, which means multiplying our misery! However, when we remain equanimous understanding the wisdom of impermanence, not only do we not create any new sankharas of aversion, we also dissolve or help eradicate the accumulated old sankharas by keeping an attitude of equanimity--when the deeper layers of unconscious mind react with aversion by sending, as if, a sensation to the 'surface.' The same applies to responding with equanimity to pleasant sensations. Remember, sensations are in contact with the deepest level of our mind, always. This is the insight into wisdom that the Buddha taught: the wisdom of *upekha*, the wisdom of equanimity. And this is the culmination of the path of insight meditation.

### ***Many Uses of Vipassana***

Michalon (2001) recommends this form of meditation to all who deal with life's major problems. In his reflections on this technique, Michalon (2001) explains, "For Vipassana meditation to be fully successful, its two essential components, concentration (*samatha*) and mindfulness (a mental eye or a 'sixth sense'), should both be given full attention and ideally be practiced hand in hand" (p. 209). Michalon explains further, "Concentration, the ability of the mind to sustain an unwavering attention on a single object of observation (oneness concentration), usually 'watching the breath,' is coupled in this approach with moment-to-moment awareness of the changing of 'objects of perception'" (p. 209).

Goenka (2001), who initiated a widespread Vipassana movement from Burma to India, and subsequently to the rest of the world in the past fifty years, clarifies, "Vipassana enables meditators to gain mastery over the mind on the basis of morality, and to develop experiential wisdom to eradicate all the defilements of craving and aversion" (p. 62). Goenka adds, "It is a practical technique that gives beneficial results here and now, just as it did in the past. At the time of the Buddha, millions of suffering people tormented by the unbearable assaults of life were relieved from this burden of suffering through Vipassana" (p. 62).



In line with Goenka's assertions regarding the discontinuation from suffering through Vipassana, Pelled (2007) confirms, "The relief from suffering (here fermentation) through meditation thus is connected to 'factors for awakening' that should be cultivated" (p. 1513). Pelled (2007) continues, "It can be understood that those factors represent components of mental activity: concentration, attention (here Mindfulness), and a state of mind called 'equanimity.' These are central factors in the practice of Vipassana meditation" (p. 1513).

Further explaining the positive influence of vipassana on one's consciousness and general wellbeing, Goenka (2006) asserts, "Vipassana, the practical quintessence of the teaching of the Buddha, is not merely a theory or philosophy for any kind of intellectual entertainment or devotional game. It is down-to-earth, practical, rational, scientific, non-sectarian and result-oriented" (p. 6). Goenka stresses that the practice of Vipassana contributes to becoming a better human being, and generating a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere around oneself and others. Goenka (2006) makes a strong statement for Vipassana as a useful instrument toward higher consciousness of people from all religions, cultures, and backgrounds. To that regard he affirms, "There is nothing objectionable in practicing the technique of concentration of the mind by observing one's natural, normal respiration, without adding any sectarian verbalization or any visualization, and imagination. Which religion can object to observing one's natural respiration?" (p. 7). Goenka (2006) continues, "Similarly, nobody objects to purifying one's mind at the deepest level, by objectively observing the interaction of mind and matter within oneself, at the level of body sensations, which again is universal" (p. 7). Linking the physical experiences in Vipassana with the interaction of mind and matter, Goenka (2006) further asserts, "The body sensations arise when the mind and matter interact with each other, every moment of one's life" (p. 7). Goenka next explains that the practice of Vipassana enables the practitioner to realize the influences of mind and body on one another. He underscores an important value of this practice, which is the emerging awareness of craving for pleasant sensations and aversion for unpleasant ones. Goenka (2006) continues, "This is the defilement of the mind

that arises and gives support to its habit pattern at its deepest level. Observing this phenomenon objectively, without reaction, one comes out of the old habit pattern or generating *rāga* and *dvesa* (craving and aversion) towards them" (p. 7). Goenka analyzes the lesson of Buddha regarding the use of consciousness in actions. Every action is preceded by a sensation: killing is preceded by animosity; stealing by greed or craving, rape or adultery by lust or passion, and any wrongdoing in general by some kind of defilement in the mind. "Vipassana helps one experience a deeper necessity to be free from every defilement and to maintain perfect *sīla* (moral discipline)" (Goenka, 2006, p. 8). Goenka, who has established a large number of vipassana institutes around the world, emphasizes,

"Unless one develops the ability to experience the reality within oneself, one keeps on generating defilement after defilement, and harming oneself. With Vipassana, one breaks the habit pattern of the mind to generate defilements at the root level of the mind. The roots of defilement are cut. There comes a time when that tree of defilement cannot grow again" (pp. 8-9).

### **Bringing Vipassana to the Academy of Management**

During a 2009 MSR session at the Academy of Management on "Meditation and Meaning", participants were first informed about the phenomenon of vipassana, its history and workings, and subsequently guided in a brief exercise in which they were invited to focus on their breathing and gently redirect their mind to this focus point if they became aware of its wandering. Guided by S.N. Goenka's (2008) world famous vipassana lectures, and tapping from their own experiences during the 10-day vipassana courses, the three facilitators subsequently guided the participants through a brief body scan, examining with their mind all facets of their body, from the top of their skull to their toes and back. The facilitators explained the reasons for scanning the body as an insight activity that would enhance the awareness of the body and its all physical and psychological manifestations, such as its feelings of pain and pleasure and its continuous cycle of arising and passing sensations. The participants used their calm,



collected minds to delve deeper into their emotions, feelings, and sensations to get a glimpse into the nature of the reality experienced in that very moment.

Prior to the ending of the meditative phase, the facilitators invited the participants to quietly concentrate on possible uses of this technique in management practices. After 20 minutes of meditation session, the participants were asked to gently redirect their awareness to rise up to the normal waking state. Thereafter, they divided themselves into the group of four to discuss their experiences and to contemplate on the

usefulness of this practice in their personal and professional lives.

### Group Findings

In the interactive part of the session, the 20 scholars were divided in 5 teams of 4. Each team was handed a poster sheet and a marker, and requested to list the team's perceived advantages and disadvantages about vipassana as a strategy toward greater meaning at work. The following findings emerged from the experience of the 5 teams:

Table 1: *Team listings of Vipassana advantages and disadvantages in work environments*

Vipassana	Advantages /Disadvantages
Greater focus	5
Greater emotional intelligence	4
Less negative emotions	4
Enhance consciousness	3
Greater self-control	3
Less ego focus	3
Greater group & environment sensitivity	3
Helpful in creativity	2
Physically/mentally healthier	2
Reduce conflict	2
Greater compassion	1
Greater output	1
Less attachment	1
Overly sensitive	1
Painful journey	1
Question meaningfulness	1
Maintaining this mindset	1
Discipline	1

#### *Analysis of the Data.*

*Advantages.* All 5 teams (100% of the scholars) agreed on the value of developing greater focus at work when engaging in vipassana meditation on a regular basis. 4 of the 5 teams (80% of the scholars) listed that greater emotional intelligence and less negative emotions, such as stress and other psychosomatic symptoms, could result from a vipassana practicing tradition. 3 out of 5 teams (60% of the scholars) felt that vipassana practice could also deliver the following advantages:

- Enhance workers' consciousness, which would lead to more deliberate decisions, choices, and perceptions toward stakeholders.
- Greater self-control of the worker, leading to improved balance in actions and responses to work-related circumstances.
- Less ego focus, which would enhance group awareness and senses of collective well-being.





Two of the five teams (40% of the scholars) agreed that regular engagement in vipassana meditation could enhance work related creativity, ensure better physical and mental health of workers, and reduce conflict among those who engaged in the practice.

Three of the teams, each representing 20% of the scholars, listed more general advantages as well, such as global compassion, to be expressed through increased awareness of one's responsibility toward the wellbeing of all living, greater output, to be perceived as an increased will to perform well; and less attachment, to be considered as a virtue toward less entanglement in work related problems and politics.

*Disadvantages.* Several teams chose not to list any disadvantages. Yet, there were 5 non-overlapping listings of the following points of caution:

- A person who engages in vipassana meditation may become overly sensitive, and therefore less capable of coping in an indifferent work environment.
- Engaging in vipassana meditation is not an easy task and may be considered too painful a journey to those who are set in their daily patterns and behaviors.
- Vipassana may enhance awareness within the worker, leading him or her to increasingly question the meaning of several of his or her activities.
- Vipassana, being a pure mindset, could be hard to maintain when exposed to toxic work environments.
- Vipassana requires a high level of discipline, in that it needs to be practiced on a regular basis in order to keep the senses awakened.

Figure 1 below represents the findings of the teams.

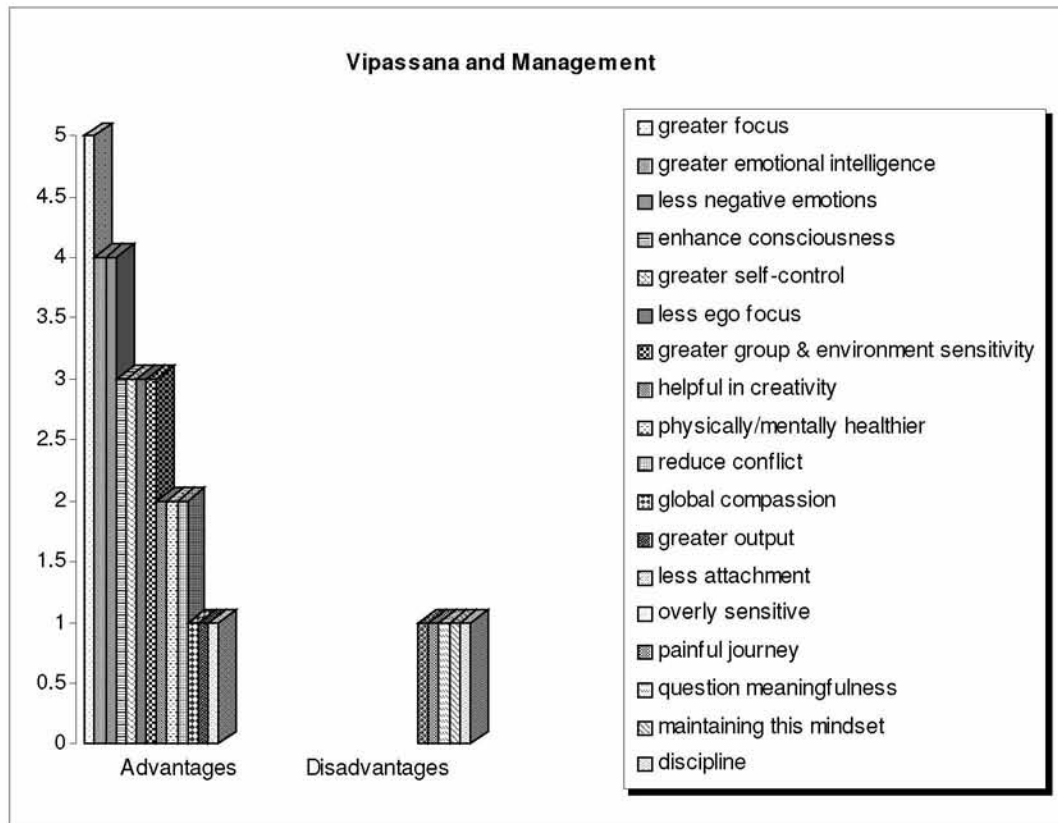


Figure 1: Perceived advantages and disadvantages of vipassana in the workplace



## Conclusion

The outcome of this brief session could be considered highly fruitful, as all participants requested to remain in contact for future updates and sharing regarding vipassana. Many of the participating scholars had never heard of insight meditation prior to this session, and several of them had never meditated before. Yet, they enjoyed the experience, even though they realized that this brief encounter was by no means a representation of the real vipassana exercise. The intentions were expressed by almost all participants to find vipassana centers near their living quarters and engage in the practice. A pleasant surprise was, that one participant had engaged in vipassana meditation for the last 10 years, once every other year, and could fully attest, alongside the session facilitators, that his life and work attitudes had significantly improved, his stress level decreased, and his overall sense of wellbeing and happiness augmented. This participant further shared that his entire family had decided to engage in vipassana

It has been said that the “order or confusion of society corresponds to and follows the order or confusion of individual minds” (Nyanaponika, 1962, p. 22). The modern civilization which excels in “manufacturing irrelevances”—to use a phrase coined by Aldous Huxley—has splendidly managed to shorten our attention span through myriad trivial pursuits geared toward instant satisfaction. In this age of “continuous partial attention,” vipassana or insight meditation has a great potential role to play in developing clarity through attentiveness and in sharpening the power of concentration by ensuring immunity from distraction and delusion. The practice of mindfulness accords greater value and presence to the activity at hand and thereby enhances our performance of the task and the resultant fulfillment. Its role in managing stress and negative emotions is well documented. (Goleman, 2003)

Vipassana has tremendous potential in enhancing workplace well-being through improved communications, efficient meetings, optimum performance, better decisions, and

greater understanding. If ‘change within is a prerequisite to a change without,’ then insight meditation accords the best place to begin the journey of inner transformation, personally and professionally. It is said that the proof of the pudding is in eating of it. In the ultimate analysis, one can only determine the efficacy of the practice of insight meditation by practicing it diligently. “*Ehipassiko*,” said the Buddha, “Come and see for yourself.”

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**Dr. Joan Marques** is co-editor of *"The Workplace and Spirituality: New Perspectives in Research and Practice"* (Skylight Paths, 2009). She is also the author of *"The Awakened Leader: One Simple Leadership Style, That Works Every Time, Everywhere"*, co-author of *"Spirituality in the Workplace: What it Means; Why it Matters; How to Make it Work for You,"* and four other books. She facilitates courses in business and management in Burbank, California, and regularly co-organizes and presents workshops for business and non-profit entities in the Los Angeles area, through the Business Renaissance Institute and the Academy of Spirituality and Professional Excellence, ASPEX, of which she is a co-founder. She is editor of four scholarly journals, and has been published in a wide variety of scholarly journals such as *Journal of Management Development, Corporate Governance, International Journal of Organizational Analysis, International Journal of Leadership Studies, Human Resource Development Quarterly, Leadership in Action, Performance Improvement, Journal of Business Ethics,* and others. Dr. Marques holds a Bachelors degree in Business Economics, a Master's degree in Business Administration, and a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership.

**Dr. Satinder Dhiman** serves as the Associate Dean, School of Business, and as Professor of Management at Woodbury University, Burbank, California. He holds a doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University and has completed advanced Executive Leadership Programs at Harvard and Stanford. He has led business leaders successfully for last 30 years and is the recipient of the prestigious 2004 ACBSP International Teacher of the Year Award and 2006 Steve Allen Excellence in Education Award. His research interests include transformational leadership, spirituality in the workplace, and mindfulness in life and leadership. He regularly co-organizes and presents workshops for business and non-profit entities in the Los Angeles area, through the Business Renaissance Institute, ([www.bri-usa.com](http://www.bri-usa.com)) which he co-founded in 2004, and the Academy of Spirituality and Professional Excellence, ASPEX ([www.aspex.info](http://www.aspex.info)) which he co-founded in 2006. Dr. Dhiman is the co-editor of *"The Workplace and Spirituality: New Perspectives in Research and Practice"* (Skylight Paths, 2009) and the co-author of *"Spirituality in the Workplace: What it Means; Why it Matters; How to Make it Work for You."*