

# **Philosophy in Practice : Exploring Synergy of Vipassana Meditation and Philosophical Counselling**

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## **Abstract :**

This paper explores how Vipassana meditation, which is rooted in Buddhist contemplative practices, can contribute to philosophical counselling, and how combination of these two perspectives together can catalyse transformative growth for individuals engaged in the philosophical counselling process. With its emphasis on right conduct (sīla), right concentration (samādhi) and right mindfulness (pañña), Vipassana provides a unique perspective that aligns with and enriches the goals of philosophical counselling. If we observe our minds, we will notice that it hops from past to the future and vice-versa. It is rare in the present moment. The ability to be in the present moment, from moment to moment, is the key to enjoying the unexpected delights that life bestows on us. This is what Vipassana teaches us “to see things as they really are” by being in the present. It is a rational mental purifying process based on self-observation. Buddha’s Dhamma is a psycho-ethical outline as well as a practical way for experiencing the truth in day-to-day life. The paper begins with a historical background and essential elements of Buddhist practice of mindfulness called Vipassana, as it is found in early Buddhist writings such as Satipatthana Sutta, followed by a step-by-step guide to practising Vipassana based on my own experience. This overview is further followed by a detailed discussion of philosophical counselling, including its aim, tools, and approaches. In today’s fast-paced world, individuals struggle with a myriad of challenges leading to heightened levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. Therefore, the objective here is to suggest that a cogent approach to philosophical counselling is rooted in the practice of mindfulness. This paper concludes with some final remarks that highlight the unique relevance that Vipassana and Metta practice hold when applied to philosophical counselling in present times. Vipassana cultivates self-awareness providing a foundation for philosophical exploration.

**Keywords** : Dhamma, Meditation, Mindfulness, Philosophical Counselling, Satipatthana Sutta, Vipassana l.

## **Introduction :**

In today’s fast-paced world, individuals struggle with a myriad of challenges leading to heightened levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. The frantic speed of modern life, societal pressures, and uncertainties contribute to mental health struggles on a global scale. In the midst of this, meditation emerges as a powerful tool for people in coping and healing. Its roots can be traced back thousands of years ago in spiritual traditions like Yoga and Buddhism emerging as paths to self-realisation or Nirvana. Today, meditation is widely embraced as a holistic approach to mental well-being. Particularly, (mindfulness meditation) and Metta (loving-kindness

meditation), have gained popularity in secular settings, including schools, workplaces, and healthcare institutions. Numerous studies support its effectiveness in reducing stress, improving attention and focus, and enhancing overall mental resilience. They empower individuals to navigate the complexities of the contemporary world with resilience and promote mental well-being. Vipassana means “to see things as they really are”. It is a logical process of mental purification through self-observation (Vipassana Research Institute, n.d.).

Philosophical exploration, which has been around since the dawn of self-reflection, has been revived as “Philosophical Counselling.” The Bhagavad Gita, Ashtavakra Gita, Upanishad teachings, Buddha’s discourses, J. Krishnamurti’s talks and discussions, and the Socratic Dialogue method can all be considered examples of philosophical practices. Philosophical counselling is a therapeutic approach that draws upon philosophical principles and methods to assist individuals in navigating life’s obstacles, exploring their beliefs and values, and developing a deeper understanding of themselves and their surroundings. In contrast to traditional forms of counselling, which depend mostly on psychological and psychiatric therapy, philosophical counselling is a method of incorporating theoretical notions into its actual operation with the explicit objective of helping someone.

This research aims to examine and discuss the transformative implications of Vipassana meditation that are directly relevant to the practice of philosophical counselling. The main objective is to unravel synergies that may enhance the efficacy of counselling interventions. Understanding the connections between philosophical practices and *Vipassana*, which is based on self-observation and insight, is the central focus. The research is based on personal experience practicing *Vipassana* in two retreats, one lasting 10 days and the other 3 days, at Dharamshala and Dehradun Vipassana Center. The method used in this study is exploratory, to find that this synthesis has the potential to offer a holistic approach to addressing existential questions and psychological challenges. Philosophical counsellors can use this approach to aid their clients in developing a deeper understanding of the world within and without.

## **2. Understanding Vipassana or Insight Meditation :**

The term “*Vipassana*” finds its etymological roots in the Pali language, and consists of two components - vi + passana. “Vi” implies intrinsically, minutely, precisely, etc whereas “Passana” means seeing, observing, analysing, introspecting, etc, implying a clear and non- judgemental perception of reality. The literal meaning of the term “*Vipassana*” is “insight” which refers to understanding things as they truly are while observing the world with a state of tranquility, awareness, and mindfulness. As a result, *Vipassana* is also known as “Insight Meditation”. Its historical narrative intertwines with the life of Gautama Buddha. Gautama’s quest for enlightenment led him to discover *Vipassana* as a transformative practice, and became the foundation of his teachings. *Vipassana* is a method for the purification of the mind. It is the highest form of awareness— the total perception of the mind-matter phenomenon in its true nature. It is the choiceless observation of things as they are (Vipassana Research Institute, n.d.).

## 2.1 Historical development and transmission :

Vipassana meditation, a practice originating from Buddha's teachings in the 5th century BCE, is rooted in the Theravada tradition and has evolved across various civilizations. The key discourse in the Pali canon, called SatipatthanaSutta, provides a comprehensive framework for mindfulness development through contemplation of the body, feelings, mental states, and mental objects. The tradition of Vipassana has vanished from India five centuries after the Buddha and its purity has been lost elsewhere. However, it was perpetuated in Myanmar by dedicated teachers passing it down through generations. In the 20th century, Vipassana was reintroduced to the western world by Burmese Indian teacher Shri S.N. Goenkaji, who established multiple Vipassana Meditation centers worldwide and offered free 10-day residential training courses.

## 2.2 Pillars of practice :

*Vipassana enables* us to experience peace and harmony by purifying the mind, freeing it from suffering and the deep-seated causes of suffering. Step by step, the practice leads to the highest spiritual goal of full liberation from all mental defilements. (*Vipassana* Research Institute, n.d.) The liberation from suffering, which originates from desires, are applied by following the Noble Eight fold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Exertion, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration of Mind. The Noble Eightfold Path further broadly categorised into three core principles of : Right conduct (*sīla*), Right concentration (*samādhi*) and Right mindfulness (*pañña*). These are the pillars of Vipassana practice. This is the truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering.

### 2.2.1 *sīla* (Right Conduct or Morality) :

This aspect emphasises the practitioner's ethical and moral behaviour, particularly during the ten days Vipassana is being learned in the centre. Practitioners are encouraged to adhere to a code of conduct that involves abstention from killing living beings, stealing, lying, intoxication, and sexual misconduct. *Sīla* provides a foundation for mental purification by promoting a lifestyle that minimises negative consequences. *sīla* helps live a life of morality by controlling the mind. The mind has to be purified to step into the practice of Vipassana. To master the mind, to purify the mind, one must live a moral life.

### 2.2.2 *Samādhi* (Right Concentration) :

In order to live Dhamma it is necessary to discipline one's mind in order to concentrate. This second step is called *samādhi*. In it, practitioners try to keep a stable and unbroken attention on the object of meditation. The purpose here is not to bring the mind to a pointed focus or free from all kinds of thought but to cleanse it from all kinds of impurities such as *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion). For this purpose, the medium of concentration chosen was a very natural and simple one – one's own breath. This meditation practice using breath as a tool is called "mindfulness of breathing" (*Anapanasati*).

Here, we need to see one thing if the mind is fixed upon any object, it will become absorbed in meditation, it will be comes till, and it will achieve one-pointed concentration which can be possible by chanting mantras or by looking at an image then why focusing on breath, because mere concentration of mind is not sammā samādhi (right concentration). For sammā samādhi, it is vital for the mind to be whole some and untainted. Only the one-pointedness of a whole some mind can be called edkusalacitt-ekaggatā samādhi-samādhi free from defilements (Vipassana Research Institute, n.d.).

### 2.2.3 Pañña (Wisdom) :

It is the development of wisdom or insight. It is the ultimate objective of Vipassana meditation, as it involves understanding the true nature of reality i.e., all corporeality, all feeling and sensations, all perceptions, all mental formations and consciousness, being impermanent (*anicca*), are a source of suffering (*dukkha*), are conditioned phenomena and hence not-self (*anatta*). It is the direct knowledge that leads us to liberation. When an individual experiences the truth that every sensation is impermanent and changing then he doesn't crave them leading to awareness and equanimity in him. Then all the deep-rooted dormant *sankhāras* (defilements) start getting uprooted and eradicated and the mind becomes totally purified. Now one attains the stage where: *Khīnam purāna mnavam natthi sambhavam*, when all old *sankhāras* have been eradicated and new *sankharas* can not be generated. Such a person is known as an Arahant.

## 2.3 The Vipassana Path : A practice manual :

Vipassana, a profound meditation practice, encompasses three core techniques:

1. Anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing)
2. Vipassana (Insight meditation)
3. Metta (loving-kindness)

### 2.3.1 Anapanasati :

The first nine days of *Vipassana* practice involve maintaining complete silence, both inward and outward, to focus on meditation. The first technique, *Anapana*, involves observing natural respiration. The first day, focus on the point where the breath enters and exits the nostrils, starting from the triangular base of the nostrils and covering the air passages. The goal is not to regulate the breath, but to observe it naturally and purely.

The second day involves trying to feel the touch of air at the triangle base of the nostrils when inhaling and exhaling. If not, try harder and breathe normally. The third day involves being aware of any sensations in the triangular area, such as tingling, heat, cold, pulsating, vibrating, numbness, and itching. The fourth day involves widening the area to the entire upper lip and being aware of any sensations.

Observing respiration helps one understand the nature of the mind, which is transient and changeable. Life can only be experienced in the present moment, and focusing on breathing helps acquire awareness of present reality and sharpen the mind.

## 2.3.2 *Vipassana* :

The first four days of *Vipassana* practice sharpen focus and concentration. The next step is *Vipassana*, which means insight into reality. It involves scanning the entire body and noting any sensations that arise along the way. The aim is not to crave pleasant sensations and discard unpleasant ones but to observe the continuously changing nature of them with an objective and equanimous mind. Through *Vipassana*, we develop a faculty of constant awareness and understanding of the universal law of impermanence, which states that sensations are not eternal but arise and pass away. This wisdom helps us respond to sensations with equanimity.

*Vipassana* is about shifting from *Vedana-paccayatanha* to *Vedana-paccayapannya*, from sensations leading to craving to sensations leading to wisdom. The goal is to change the habit pattern of mind that automatically reacts with craving to pleasant sensations and aversion to unpleasant sensations, to develop a mind that remains equanimous towards life experiences by remembering the law of impermanence. By not reacting with craving and aversion, we purify our mind at the deepest level. Over the next five days, an individual's progress is measured by the degree of equanimity developed, which is the insight into wisdom taught by the Buddha.

## 2.3.3 *Mettā* :

*Mijjati siniyhati 'ti mettā* - that which inclines one to a friendly disposition is *mettā*. *Mettā* is a Pali word which means loving-kindness. It is the practice of cultivation of good will towards oneself and others. It enables one to share one's peace, happiness and harmony with all beings. It is introduced on the last day as from the past 10 days an individual was going through the process of purification. Only after the purification one can feel a deep wish for the well-being of others and it can be truly effective. *Mettā* may be regarded as the culmination of the practice of *Vipassana*.

## 3. Philosophical Counselling : An Overview

In the global tradition, philosophical counselling is not an uncommon occurrence. It's rooted in ancient philosophical traditions and emerged in the mid-20th century as a therapeutic approach. Philosophical counselling acknowledges the inherent connection between philosophy and human experiences. It offers a unique lens through which individuals can navigate existential dilemmas, ethical difficulties, and the quest for meaning in their lives. Philosophical counselling is a therapeutic approach that utilises philosophical ideas, methods, and dialogues to help individuals explore and understand their beliefs, values, and existential concerns. This approach is still evolving, adapting old philosophical insight to modern concerns, and it offers a vital alternative for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of themselves and the complexities of existence. This process is non-prescriptive, emphasising the importance of individuals discovering their own insights and understanding through philosophical inquiry.

The purpose of philosophical counselling is to engage in authentic inner explorations of existentially significant problems such as : Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What is death? What does it mean to live a good and happy life? Why is there inner and outer conflict? Is it possible to

be free from these conflicts? How can one live with one's self and others peacefully? Philosophical counselling assists the counselee in moving beyond their preconceived conceptions in order to reframe their reality. For example, If a counselee is concerned about their career's success or an ethical issue, the counsellor may investigate what the terms "success" or "ethics" mean to them, which may help the counselee know themselves better. They may also realise that they don't need to be as concerned about success as they previously imagined. The counselee is encouraged to self-reflect during this course of encounters between a counsellor and a counselee in order to develop a deeper understanding of oneself. Better self-awareness leads to greater self-reliance. These issues concern not only a philosopher but every person who is capable of reflecting on his or her life. Fundamentally, philosophical counselling acknowledges that individuals often struggle with significant issues in life that go beyond the scope of therapeutic psychology. It is a journey wherein a philosophical counsellor guides the counselee to explore and identify the reasons for their trouble through reflective dialogues and dialectical discussions, encouraging them to examine their assumptions, values, and thought patterns.

There are several tools used in philosophical practice, the most important of which is the Socratic dialogue method, including Socratic questioning and reflective discourse. In this, counsellors facilitate open discussions with clients, encouraging them to explore their beliefs, emotions, values, and existential concerns, fostering a better understanding of their worldview. Existential phenomenology and thought experiments involve exploring the subjective experiences of the client. In contrast to specific therapeutic approaches that adhere to particular doctrines, counsellors can adopt conventional philosophical theories from an Indian and Western perspective in order to draw out ideas and potential solutions. This diversity allows counsellors to customise their approach to an individual's particular needs and perspectives. Through these tools, philosophical counselling emphasises self-awareness, clarity, and personal development while offering a conceptual framework for navigating the complexity of life and enhancing the client's well-being.

#### **4. Vipassana and Philosophical Counselling : Some Practical Considerations**

The world is full of social problems, ranging from simple family conflicts to tribal disputes, and then later to state rivalries and international wars, and examples of these may be found in our day-to-day lives. People are suffering from unhealthy surroundings, or facing discrimination, seemingly unfair burdens of misery and oppression, and they react with fear and mistrust. All of these circumstances cause an individual to doubt their own existence and purpose in life. The synergy between *Vipassana* and philosophical counselling is profound. They are both rooted in different traditions but share some common goals aimed at enhancing people's well-being and understanding. In a system of philosophical counselling rooted in *Vipassana*, the broad purpose of a counselling session would be to deconstruct the perceptions one has created of the self and others. *Vipassana* helps individuals to develop better self-awareness and insight into their own patterns of reactive habits. Only when our perception shifts do we gain the ability to observe a situation in its entirety. As the layers of mental impurities begin to peel off



through the practice of Vipassana, there is greater clarity of thinking, which also in turn helps us in improving our ability of decision making. We begin to develop better judgement of people and situations. This also helps to improve our relationships with colleagues, family members, neighbours, and others. Similarly, philosophical counselling also prompts individuals to critically examine their beliefs and values, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves. Philosophical counselling emphasises developing deeper insight about one's own self and one's relationship to the universe, rather than resolving a specific problem that a person may be experiencing.

Vipassana focuses on diverting the nature of mind from always craving and reacting to things to a stable and neutral mind. Vipassana encourages individuals to observe sensations (Vedana) with equanimity, fostering a deep understanding of impermanence of worldly objects, suffering, and the interdependence of all existence. This increased consciousness can serve as a framework for philosophical counselling, enriching discussions about the human situation. Practitioners often obtain insights into the fleeting nature of thoughts and emotions, allowing for a detached viewpoint that can modify attitudes on personal difficulties. "If we practise the art of mindful living," says Thich Nhat Hanh, when things change, we won't have any regrets. We can smile because we have done our best to enjoy every moment of our life and to make others happy" (Nhat Hanh, 124). Here, I remember a favourite poem of mine and of Goenkaji as well that is "It is easy enough to be pleasant when life flows like a sweet song, but the man worth while is the one who can smile when things go dead wrong."

## 5. Conclusion :

Vipassana is a technique with a very practical application. It not only allows us to navigate the ups and downs of life in a detached manner, but it also promotes social well-being. This science is not only for self-development but also for social development. It is a way of life in which we learn to live in peace and harmony with ourselves and others. In conclusion, the consequences of Vipassana meditation for philosophical counselling are significant. This paper explored the synergy of Vipassana meditation and philosophical counselling, focusing on the importance of right conduct, right concentration, and right mindfulness. Vipassana is a logical mental purification process based on self-observation, and it is rare in the present moment. The emphasis on mindfulness, impermanence, and self-awareness in the practice is perfectly aligned with the goals of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical counsellors, by incorporating Vipassana concepts, can provide a holistic approach to existential concerns, expanding the journey of self-discovery and meaning making for the client seeking guidance from them in the complicated situations of life.

**Bhavatu sabba mangalam— May all beings be happy.**

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