

# HYPERTENSION AND VIPASSANA MEDITATION:AN EXPLORATION

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## ABSTRACT:

“Vipassana Meditation” is given to us by ‘Gautama Budhha’- “*the enlightened one*”, some 1500 years ago. According to literature available in “Pali” language, Gautama Budhha, has re-introduced this ancient technique to India from Burmese monks, who used to practise this technique. In India, it has been popularised by S N Goenka, who learned this technique from his Burmese teacher, Sayagi U Ba Kin in Burma. Later on, S N Goenka returned to India in 1969 and with help from others, established enormous centres in and outside India for teaching ‘Vipassana’ to all. In essence this technique is often understood as something which is a path towards attaining “*Nirvana*” (*mokshaya*). However, according to ‘Pali’ literature (which is translated in to English and other languages now) when we practice ‘Vipassana’, we observe many changes in ourselves as a by-product of continuous meditative practice. One such positive by-product is acquiring equanimous state of mind towards outside situations or stimuli. This equanimity of mind, which when develops, will be helpful in subsiding symptoms of many known and existing psychosomatic illness. Hypertension could be one of them. Present research article attempts to explore the benefits of ‘Vipassana Meditation’ in managing one of the prominent conditions related with human circulatory system- the High Blood Pressure or Hypertension.

**Keywords:** Vipassana, Meditation, High Blood Pressure, Hypertension, Nirvana

## INTRODUCTION-

Hypertension or High Blood Pressure (HBP) is generally understood as a condition in which long term force of blood against walls of artery is high. This condition may eventually cause health problems, such as heart disease. In human beings’ blood pressure is determined both by the amount of blood your heart pumps and the amount of resistance to blood flow in your arteries. The more blood your heart pumps and the narrower your arteries, the higher your blood pressure. A blood pressure reading is given in millimetres of mercury (mm Hg). It has two numbers, the top or the upper number (systolic pressure), measures the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats and the bottom or the second number (diastolic pressure) measures the pressure in your arteries between beats. Hypertension is diagnosed if, when it is measured on two different days, the systolic blood pressure readings on both days is  $\geq 140$  mmHg and/or the diastolic blood pressure readings on both days is  $\geq 90$  mmHg (WHO, 2021).

Hypertension is called a "silent killer". Most people with hypertension are unaware of the problem because it may have no warning signs or symptoms. According to an estimate by world health organisation, it is a serious medical condition that significantly increases the risks of heart, brain, kidney and other diseases. An estimated 1.28 billion adults aged 30-79 years worldwide have hypertension, most (two-thirds) living in low- and middle-income countries. However, an estimated 46% of adults with hypertension are unaware that they have the condition. Hypertension is a major cause of premature death worldwide. (WHO, 2021).

## COMPLICATIONS OF HYPERTENSION-

Among other complications, hypertension can cause serious damage to the heart. Excessive pressure can harden arteries, decreasing the flow of blood and oxygen to the heart. This elevated pressure and reduced blood flow can cause; chest pain or Heart attack or Heart failure or Irregular heart beat which can lead to a sudden death. Hypertension can also burst or block arteries that supply blood and oxygen to the brain, causing a stroke. In addition, hypertension can cause kidney damage, leading to kidney failure. (Mayo Clinics, 2020). as such literature puts that there is no permanent cure for hypertension but management is possible. pharmacotherapy has been known to help patients with hypertension, but it does have its own side effects. so experts always advocates changes in life styles, diet etc to have maximum benefits of pharmacotherapy. However, no permanent cure is documented. There comes vipassana in to picture.

## WHAT IS VIPASSANA-

‘Vipassana’ is a unique technique for obtaining peace and harmony within an individual at the experiential level. The great sage of India, Gotama the Buddha, discovered- or rather rediscovered- this technique through his deep meditation. He attained enlightenment through this technique and was liberated from all the defilements of the mind. Then with great compassion and love, he distributed it to the suffering mankind. He did not establish any "ism" or "cult." He taught Vipassana- a way to purify the mind of its negativities of craving and

aversion. It is not a rite or ritual based on blind faith. There is no visualization of any god, goddess or any other object, or verbalization of any mantra or 'japa'. Neither is it an intellectual nor philosophical entertainment. The word 'Vipassana' is derived from *passa* (to look, to observe) and *vi* (in a special way). It means "observing oneself in a special way". It is a technique that purifies the mind, deconditioning the negativities of anger, hatred, greed, selfishness etc. by self-observation and introspection. It is insight meditation. It is looking at things as they are and not through coloured glasses. It is an effort to change the deep habit-pattern of the mind which dwells in the continuous blind reactions of craving and aversion.

#### **Vipassana: The Technique-**

Vipassana is taught in a basic ten-day residential course. The course is very demanding, requiring the student to observe noble silence and follow strict rules of discipline. The daily schedule requires, on an average, ten hours of meditation, with regular breaks. Instructions are given periodically throughout the day, and every evening there is a videotaped discourse by the Teacher, S.N. Goenka which explains and clarifies the day's practice.

There are three steps to the training given in a Vipassana course. The first is the observance of five basic precepts of morality which, in practice, means abstention from violence, lying, theft, sexual misconduct and the use of alcohol and other intoxicants. In short, observance of these precepts means right action, right speech, and right livelihood. Whenever one violates these, one generates impurities in one's mind. These impurities are the root cause of the stresses and strains from which one tries to gain release. When you start practicing Vipassana, deep inside you understand that every time you break any one of these precepts, you have started harming yourself, even before you start harming others. When you generate anger, you cannot possibly experience peace and harmony since you feel so agitated, so miserable. This is the law of Nature. It is a universal truth. (Duster, 1968).

The next step is to achieve some mastery over our unruly mind by focusing attention on the natural and normal breath (not controlled and regulated breath as in *pranayama*). This is called *Anapana-sati*, which means "awareness of respiration." There is no verbalization or visualization, just observation of natural and normal breath! This concentration helps to sharpen the mind. This helps the meditator to take the next step of Vipassana, where he or she is required to observe the sensations that manifest in the entire body every moment, as a result of the constant and continuous interaction of mind and matter (Hart, 1987).

Our minds are constantly reacting to pleasant and unpleasant happenings in the world outside. But a deep investigation of the mind through Vipassana reveals that when we react, we are actually reacting to the body sensations that result from our contact with the outside world or our own thoughts. When a thought arises, it manifests as a sensation on the body-pleasant or unpleasant-and one starts to like or dislike it. This is a law of Nature. Soon those likes and dislikes begin to consolidate and develop into negativities of craving and aversion. One starts tying knots deep in the unconscious mind. We create misery for ourselves by continuously reacting to the sensations.

In this technique we train the mind to observe all the sensations with detachment and equanimity-that is, without developing craving for pleasant sensations or aversion towards unpleasant or painful ones. As one proceeds on this path, one experiences that all sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are constantly changing. They are impermanent, (*anicca*) and essenceless (*anatta*)-without any substance. This is the inherent nature of everything that exists in the Universe, whether animate or inanimate. One begins to understand experientially, not merely from book knowledge (Hart, 1987)

When one begins to be non-reactively aware of the different sensations, pleasant or unpleasant, the entire mass of the mind gradually becomes conscious and aware. The barrier between the conscious and unconscious mind is broken, and one stops reacting blindly. The mental purification- cleaning, deconditioning-strikes at the root-level, that is, the unconscious mind, where our deep-rooted defilements are stored like sleeping volcanoes which cause us so much misery when they erupt.

'Vipassana' is, therefore, a process of self-purification through self-observation and introspection. It is a technique of non-verbal, self-administered "psychoanalysis" in that it sets into motion the process of tension-release. One is able, as it were, to operate on one's own mind and observe it as a witness. (Clifford, 1969; Pele, 1979)

#### **ROLE OF VIPASSANA IN HYPERTENSION-**

Though not much published literature is currently available reflecting the role of "Vipassana" mediation in managing hypertension but going by the pure nature of the technique it seems capable in dealing with this condition. As conveyed by S N Goenka, apart from the purification of the mind, which is the primary goal of the technique, though, Vipassana, one may also experience gains at the physical and psychological level. As we know, that many common ailments such as hypertension, headaches, ulcers, acidity, etc., are very often psychosomatic. These are automatically cured as a by-product of the cleansing process of Vipassana.

Goenkaji's teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, in his research work at IMC Rangoon, noticed that very stubborn diseases, progressive, crippling, degenerative conditions, or incurable ailments have vanished as side-

effects of the practice of Vipassana. This has been well documented in his booklet "Real Values of Vipassana Meditation." (Silkworth, 1955).

This interrelation of mind and matter is the key to 'Vipassana' meditation, and it was of crucial significance in the teaching of the Buddha, as was said that "Whatever arises in the mind is accompanied by sensation" (Anguttara Nikaya 8, Mulaka Sutta). Therefore, observation of sensations offers a means to examine the totality of one's being, physical as well as mental. In the "Satipatthana Sutta", the Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness, the Buddha presented the practical method of Vipassana meditation, for purifying the mind. Here, the importance of sensation (Pāli: vedana) is stressed (Fenwick & Lorimer, 1989). The deepest level of the mind (unconscious mind) is constantly in contact with the bodily sensations. As we develop awareness of the sensations and observe them with equanimity, we gradually become non-reactive, thereby our mind is strained not to react to situations or stimuli from the environment. As documented that surrounding situation creates a deep impact on person thought process which elicits corresponding reactions from the person. Thus, when the person is constantly surrounded by stressful and anxiety provoking situations, he is more bound for anxious reactions constantly which may make him hypertensive. Through the practice of Vipassana, the person gradually learns to be a witness of the accompanying bodily sensations and not be the part of the sensations. Thereby not accumulating unwanted stress (in mind) and not affecting his mental health. Through the process and practice of witnessing the bodily sensations as and when they appear, he develops an equanimous state of mind and through this equanimity of mind, he develops a change in his autonomic arousals.

### CONCLUSION:

Though stress is inevitable part of human life and nobody can escape it, but one can learn to befriend it, 'Vipassana' is one way for it. Literature strongly advocates that change in life style is also very important in dealing with Hypertension apart from pharmacotherapy. 'Vipassana' by its very nature holds promising results in managing Hypertension, as in most cases, the cause is Psycho-somatic. With constant practice of 'Vipassana', the person understands the impermanence of bodily sensations (developed in almost all circumstances though at subtle level) and by being witness to these sensations, a sense of equanimity of mind is created. Eventually with this equanimous mind there would be a decrease in autonomic arousals (reactions) and subsequently the condition of Hypertension is expected to subside. However, we need substantial research with scientific designs (Randomized Control Trials) to arrive at this conclusion, but theoretically 'Vipassana' hold much promise.

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