



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XII • OCTOBER 2017

Words of Dhamma

*Dunnigghassa lahuno, yatthakāmanipātino.
Cittassa damatho sādhu, cittā dantā sukhāvahā.*

Wonderful it is to train the mind,
so swiftly moving, seizing whatever it wants.
Good it is to have a well-trained mind,
for a well-trained mind brings happiness.

Dhammapada 3.53



FIRST COURSE OPENED DOORS, BRINGING COURAGE AND CLARITY

Vipassana Teacher S.N. Goenka once visited Donaldson prison in Alabama. The book “Caravan of Dhamma,” issued by Pariyatti Publishing, gives an account of his meeting the inmate students. The visit was in May 2002, on the final day of a 10-day course in the prison. It was only the second course held at Donaldson; the first had been four months earlier, in January 2002.

Goenkaji was led to the prison gymnasium, which had been transformed into a temporary meditation hall. Inside, students from both the first and second courses were meditating. Goenkaji expressed his joy at being able to visit the meditators in prison.

Following the group sitting, he gave a short talk. He told the prisoners that in addition to working for their own liberation, the regular practice of Vipassana would help them fulfill two important responsibilities. First, they would be giving a good example to their fellow inmates, so that they might also be inspired to try Vipassana. Second, they would be helping to make the Vipassana program at Donaldson a success, and this, in turn, would make the government take notice. Thus, inmates in other prisons in the country would have a better chance to learn Vipassana. Furthermore, a successful Vipassana program in U.S. prisons would make it easier to implement prison courses in other countries as well.

A number of inmates asked questions or made comments. One said, “I kept running away from myself all these years. Finally, Vipassana forced me to face my inner self – to look inward. It was the most difficult thing I had ever done, but Vipassana gave me the courage and clarity to come to terms with the present reality.”

Goenkaji also gave a talk to prison staff, student inmates, and selected inmates who had not yet taken a course. Among other insights, he offered this: “You live within the walls of prison, away from your family, away from the comforts of a home. And this makes you miserable. But there is a greater prison that is the true cause of your misery. People both within and outside of the walls of the prison are prisoners of their unwholesome mental habit patterns. All keep on generating mental impurities such as anger, fear, hatred, jealousy, and greed, which make them miserable. The purpose of Vipassana is to free ourselves from the prison inside.”

Since Goenkaji’s visit to Donaldson, Vipassana meditation has been taught in prisons in six U.S. states and Canadian provinces. It has also been taught in prisons in countries including India, Israel, Colombia, Mexico, Mongolia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, Myanmar, and the U.K.

THE PATH TO HAPPINESS

The following is an excerpt from the Day 8 discourse by Goenkaji.

The body needs food only two or three times a day, but the flow of the mind requires an input every moment. The mental input is sankhara. Every moment the sankhara that one generates is responsible for sustaining the flow of consciousness. The mind that arises in the next moment is a product of this sankhara. Every moment one gives the input of sankhara, and the flow of consciousness continues. If at any moment one does not generate a new sankhara the flow does not stop at once; instead it draws on the stock of old sankhara. An old sankhara will be forced to give its fruit, that is, to come to the surface of the mind in order to sustain the flow; and it will manifest as a physical sensation. If one reacts to the sensation, again one starts making new sankhara, planting new seeds of misery. But if one observes the sensation with equanimity, the sankhara loses its strength and is eradicated. Next moment another old sankhara must come up to sustain the mental flow. Again one does not react, and again it is eradicated. So long as one remains aware and equanimous, layer after layer of old sankhara will come to the surface and be eradicated; this is the law of nature.

Awareness and equanimity will lead to purification of mind. Whatever one experiences on the way, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is unimportant. The important point is not to react with craving or aversion, since both will create nothing but misery. The only yardstick to measure one's progress on the path is the equanimity that one has developed. And the equanimity must be at the level of bodily sensations if one is to go to the depths of the mind and eradicate the impurities. If one learns to be aware of sensations and to remain equanimous towards them, it becomes easy to keep one's balance in external situations as well.

The Buddha was once asked what real welfare is. He replied that the highest welfare is the ability to keep the balance of one's mind in spite of all the vicissitudes, the ups and downs, of life. One may face pleasant or painful situations, victory or defeat, profit or loss, good name or bad name; everyone is bound to encounter all these. But can one smile in every situation, a real smile from the heart? If one has this equanimity at the deepest level within, one has true happiness.

WHAT ARE SANKHARA?

Sankhara are habit patterns and tendencies of the mind that result from thinking, reacting, speaking and behaving in the same ways, over and over again.

Everybody's got plenty.

All sankhara have the nature of impermanence. That is, they arise and pass away. If we do not identify with them, or cling to them, they gradually dissolve.

They may not be very deep, and therefore can be easily changed. Or they may be very deep habit patterns (addictions) that are so ingrained they actually control our behavior.

Sankhara are not solid things that can be quickly destroyed. Rather, they are mental tendencies, habits, cravings, fears, etc. that can be gradually weakened by patient, focused and skillful effort.



HOW A CALM & STRONG MIND HELPS YOU

The following is from a conversation with a meditation teacher who has extensive experience with courses in prisons.

How can a student overcome the distractions of prison, including noise and violence, and persevere with a daily practice?

When I tell myself it's too noisy to meditate, or I am too tired, or meditation is boring – I hear my old habit patterns. We are making excuses to avoid doing something that is difficult. And often we kid ourselves that if I stop now, I will meditate later. That's another habit pattern. Postponing! It's better to see those discouragements for what they are, and to work to build up our discipline and weaken the old habit patterns. Breath is breath, sensations are sensations, and you can meditate anywhere. Yes, if there are disruptions around it is harder, but that is when we need at least some peace in our minds.

Why do these habit patterns exist?

We all want to avoid feeling uncomfortable. We forget that the discomfort is temporary, and without thinking we try to do something to make ourselves feel better. That's our habit. What helps is that you know from past experience that you feel more relaxed and comfortable from meditating. Every time you meditate you are training yourself, and weakening the old habits, so you can make better choices in difficult situations.

Should students who are religious be concerned that meditation goes against their beliefs?

No, there is nothing contrary to religion in this practice. We are not saying you must believe anything; meditation is about strengthening your mind. You can use meditation to become a better Christian, or Muslim, or Jew, or atheist, or whatever. Strengthening your mind is like strengthening your body – it has nothing to do with religion. You wouldn't stop exercising because you were Christian or Muslim. And there's no reason to stop meditating, either.

Some students may feel that, being in prison, survival depends on retaliation. Can meditation make us weaker?

We don't meditate to become passive and weak. We meditate to gain strength so that we can make better decisions for ourselves. If you have self-control you can decide how to act in a way that causes the least harm to yourself. Noticing the sensations you are feeling – those warning signals help you no matter where you are. Then you have a moment to choose how to deal with a situation, rather than reacting blindly to the unpleasant sensations and emotions.

If someone is feeling hopeless, and when meditating feels painful sensations intensely, what good is that?

Meditating can be intense, and sometimes that means we get caught up in our anger or frustration, and the sensations that go with those thoughts and emotions. That happens when we are not meditating, too. Rather than be overwhelmed try to remember: "Oh! I need to focus on my breath." When you do this you become calmer. That way you support yourself.

What advantages come from having a calm mind?

When the mind is calm we are more aware, and can see situations from different sides. We look at what we have done in our lives, and the usual excuses – the denials – do not get in the way. Instead, we can see what's driving us, and can take control over how we act. Every course several students tell me, "I feel badly about embarrassing my family, especially my mother." Meditation helps break down our defenses to face honestly what we know inside. It allows us to say, "I want to apologize, and not do that again." It helps us change our behavior and move closer towards being the person we want to be. This gradually comes from your own experience, not what someone tells you.

How can meditators help each other to continue to practice?

The best thing is to talk to each other, one-on-one. Sit together whenever it is possible. Talk about how hard it is to attain any equanimity, about how we can use what we learn – our practice – to remember to use our breath. To remember that this, whatever you are experiencing, is going to pass. To remember that if I react now, things will get worse.

If I know someone who can benefit from this, what can I do to help him take a course?

Talk about how it has helped you. You had questions, too, and having questions is natural. Say how hard it is. Encourage them.

FACING REALITY: Q&A WITH GOENKAJI

S.N. Goenka answered thousands of questions during nearly 50 years of teaching Vipassana. His answers reveal deep understanding of the mind/life relationship, and his compassion for all.

Question: *Our residence is in the midst of a crowded city, which makes it difficult to meditate. Is there any way to keep such outside disturbances out of our meditation?*

Goenkaji: (laughs) Either you change your residence—run away from the noise of the city—or you become so powerful that you can stop all noises around you. Neither is possible. You have to strengthen yourself and learn how to ignore all these disturbances. In the same way that a lotus living in water is not affected by the water, you can ignore all these disturbances.

For example, right now we are talking, and a bird is chirping outside. This bird does not disturb us—we are busy with our discussion. In the same way, we may be busy with our meditation. Let any noise be there; we continue our meditation. One has to train oneself. One has to live in the world full of disturbances, and in spite of this, maintain peace and harmony within. Going for weekly group sittings and one-day courses will also help to strengthen your daily meditation.

Question: *What should I do when lack of willpower and laziness are obstructing my meditation?*

Goenkaji: Develop willpower, strong willpower. If you are so weak that you keep breaking your decision to meditate every day in the morning and evening, then take a strong decision that you won't eat your breakfast without having sat for one hour. How many days will you miss your breakfast? You will start practicing daily.

And as far as laziness or drowsiness is concerned: examine yourself. If the laziness is because of lack of sleep, then sleep for some time. Get refreshed. But if you find this laziness is because of your mental impurity, which has become a barrier for you, then fight it out. Practice hard breathing for some time, sprinkle cold water on your eyes, stand up, walk. Somehow or other, get rid of it.

Question: *We are able to observe the sensations on the body with some equanimity. But how do we observe thoughts and emotions with equanimity?*

Goenkaji: It is not necessary to observe the thoughts. Only accept the fact that now there is some chattering going on in the mind; that is good enough. Any thought or emotion that arises in the mind can't arise without a sensation on the body. When you are working with the sensations you are working at the root level of your mind. You are purifying your mind at the root level. So be with the sensation, and just accept the fact that some chattering or emotion is going on, that is all. Don't go into the details of the thoughts or emotions.



2017/2018 COURSES

Donaldson Schedule

December 6
(Old Student Course)

February 22
(10-day Course)

May 3
(10-day Course)

August 23
(3-day Course)

October 11
(10-day Course)

December 5
(Old Student Course)