

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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Words of Dhamma

*Sukarāni asādhūni, attano abhitāni ca.
Yam ve hitaṅca sādhuṅca, tam ve paramadukkaram.*

*Easy to do are things
that are bad and harmful to oneself.
But exceedingly difficult to do
are things that are good and beneficial.*

Dhammapada 12.163



THE MESSENGER OF INNER PEACE: SATYA NARAYAN GOENKA

The following has been adapted from the International Vipassana Newsletter, October 2013 issue.

It was late afternoon of a long day toward the end of August 2000. In the United Nations General Assembly Hall in New York, delegates to the Millennium World Peace Summit were weary and a little jaded. This was the first global gathering of religious and spiritual leaders at the UN, and it had descended into acrimony. Far from finding common ground, the delegates had sharply differed over the issue of whether it was “right” for religious groups to try to convert people from other religions to theirs. Some delegates were highly critical of the practice; others representing some of the leading religions rejected those views. Over the years, the hall had often been the setting for this sort of wrangle involving politicians; it was disappointing to see spiritual leaders doing no better.

To close the session, a lesser-known figure made his way to the podium, helped by an assistant. His silver hair gleamed; he wore a smartly tailored Indian suit. Carefully he paid respects and smilingly surveyed the crowd. Then he started speaking, and within seconds he had caught the attention of the assembled dignitaries. “Religion is religion only when it unites,” he said. “Religion is no religion when it divides.” The words were greeted with a sudden burst of applause. The delegates started to pay attention. “So much has been said for and against conversion,” he continued. “I am for conversion, not against it. But conversion not from one organized religion to another organized religion – no. Conversion from misery to happiness. Conversion from bondage to liberation. Conversion from cruelty to compassion. That is the conversion needed today.” Applause greeted almost every statement.

The speaker warmed to his theme: “If I have an agitated mind full of anger, hatred, ill will and animosity, how can I give peace to the world? Therefore, all the sages and saints and seers of the world have said, ‘Know thyself.’ Not merely at the intellectual, emotional or devotional level, but at the actual level. When you know the truth about yourself at the experiential level, many of the problems get solved.”

Surveying the crowd, he added, “When I observe myself and find that I am generating anger, ill will or animosity, I realize that I am the first victim of the hatred or animosity I am generating within myself. Only afterwards do I start harming others. And if I am free from these negativities, nature or God Almighty starts rewarding me: I feel so peaceful. Whether I call myself a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a Jain, it makes no difference: a human being is a human being. Human mind is human mind. Conversion should be from impurity of the mind to purity of the mind. This is the real conversion that is necessary – nothing else.” The speaker that day was Satya Narayan Goenka, or Goenkaji, as we know him. His words struck a note of harmony in the hall that day.

PRISON COURSES SURPRISE BOTH INMATES & AUTHORITIES

Vipassana courses take place in prisons around the world. In one vast Asian country, Mongolia, which is more than twice the size of Texas, prison courses have been held for more than 10 years – and have grown exponentially. Three 10-day courses were organized in Mongolia's only women's prison between 2006 and 2008. These were deemed very beneficial but, due to a variety of circumstances, could not be continued. As a result, there were no more prison courses until 2014 when the national Minister of Justice, an old student of Vipassana, asked the volunteers serving on the local Prison Trust if they would offer courses in a men's prison. The answer was yes, provided the following terms were met: at least three prison officials attend each of that year's courses at the nearby Vipassana Center; food in prison courses be prepared according to the Vipassana Center menu; and after the first prison course Vipassana inmates be given the time and place to hold daily group sittings.

Ministry of Justice and Prison Authority officials agreed, and over the next few months about 75 government officials sat Vipassana courses. Justice officials were confident that good results would come. Prison Authority officials were not so sure, because the results of other meditation and yoga programs had been poor. The Prison Trust volunteers then surprised officials by asking permission to enter the worst prison in the country. The officials agreed. And so they went to the notorious Maanit Prison.



Inside Maanit the volunteers organized orientation talks, and showed prison documentaries including *Doing Time*, *Doing Vipassana* and *The Dhamma Brothers*. Forty-three prisoners asked to join the first course, including several inmates with histories of behavior problems. The course went well and Vipassana's positive effects were revealed: one year later no student who sat the course had caused a single disciplinary incident. The volunteer Trust members returned in 2015 to hold a larger course, and to make a 40-minute documentary film. It explains how Anapana and Vipassana purify the mind and considers the challenges people face when transforming themselves for the better. These challenges are mostly expressed by inmates.

The video was sent to all 25 Mongolian prisons, prompting more prison administrators to ask for courses in their institutions. And when inmates saw other Mongolian inmates practicing Vipassana and benefiting enormously, hundreds were inspired. In 2017, four 10-day courses were organized, for 55, 161, 203, and 233 inmates respectively. The success of this program, according to a local Vipassana Teacher and Prison Trust member, is largely due to prison officials. Not only have dozens taken at least one Vipassana course, but they serve as Dhamma workers during prison courses, and are following through on implementing morning and evening group sittings for Vipassana inmates.

The most recent course, in February 2018, in a maximum-security prison, involved 125 inmates, including 61 old students. The old students meditated so quietly and sincerely that the newcomers were deeply affected. "We had such a peaceful course," the Teacher said. "The students were quieter than at regular courses at the Vipassana Center."

Government officials have now signed a long-term agreement with the Prison Trust to have at least five prison courses in Mongolia every year. With the cooperation of the Prison Authority, the Trust members are planning weekly group sittings and one-day courses for recently-released Vipassana inmates. These will take place in a prison in the center of the capital city. So former inmates will be returning to prison just to meditate together.

DEEP, GOOD CHANGE HAS TAKEN PLACE

This following is from a conversation with a meditator who has served as a manager in eight prison courses.

Why do you do this kind of work?

At most courses I sat in meditation centers, the people were mostly white and well off. I wanted to sit a course with more people of color. Then I saw the movie *The Dhamma Brothers*, and thought: I want to be involved with a course in prison. I connected with the North American Vipassana Prison Trust, which at the time was only allowing Assistant Teachers to serve prison courses. I said, “It might be nice if the men inside had someone who looked something like them helping with the course.” I gave my argument and they said, “We will try you out.”

I went in with a little bit of a Boy Scout mentality: do good for people in need. Meeting inmate students for the first time I thought, “Man, if we were outside, I would cross the street to not be near some of these guys.” But then I started to see more, to see it differently. A big part of why I go back is that I see positive changes in a lot of the men. I see transformation – and suspect they have even more transformations that I don’t see.

What kind of changes do you see?

Some men are very aggressive. I think that’s a persona a lot of people put on in prison: you want to be a tough guy. And some of the younger ones act out, and push boundaries. But even they – the ones who finish a course – get a lot out of it. By the end of courses, you can see the compassion and caring in the men. And over years I have seen some of the same guys, and can see how deep, good change has taken place. This is true and accurate, and why I keep serving.

Does doing this also change you?

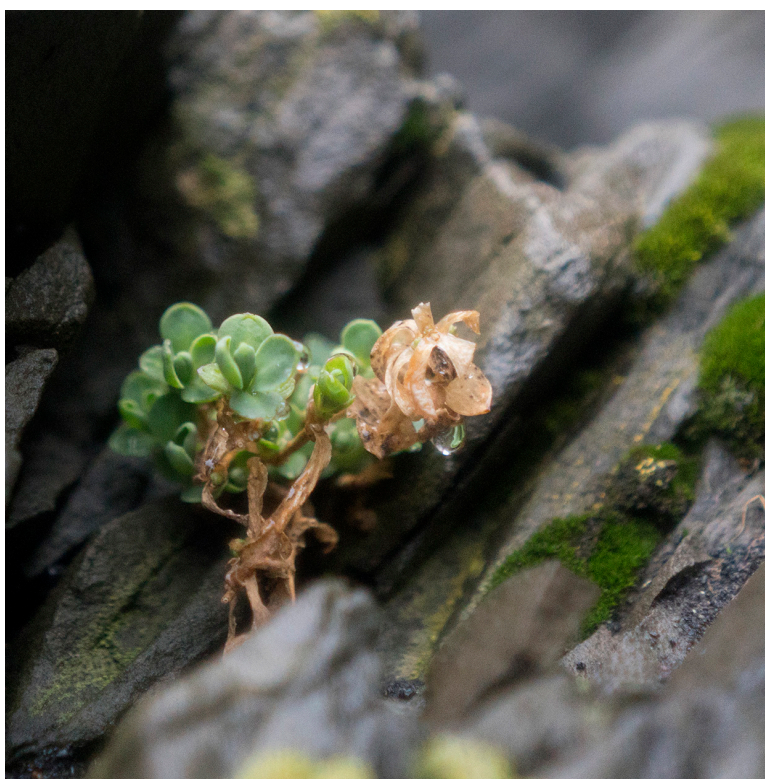
Doing prison courses has helped me realize how similar I am to a lot of people inside. Maybe it is only by chance that I didn’t wind up in prison. You know, a lot of people on the outside could say the same thing. Overall, I have learned a lot. And doing this helps my own meditation practice.

When meditating, pain can be a problem – both mental and physical pain. Why do we have to work with pain? I have enough pain in my life. Before meditating I assumed a lot of my pain was caused by things outside, because the world was treating me poorly. From meditation I learned that I have control over a lot of my pain, and maybe even cause it by the way I react.

Goenka says, “just observe the pain.” So I can be sitting there and it feels like someone is putting a red hot lance in my knee, and I am thinking this will go on and on – then it’s suddenly not there. So I say, “wonderful – no more pain.” But then it is there again. Ultimately I realized that there is no one putting a lance in my knee. I am creating it, or it is just happening; either way, it doesn’t last. It comes and goes. I learned this from experience. And knowing this helps me cope with all of the other pain in my life.

How did you start to meditate?

I was a high school math teacher, and a student told me about it. Later I asked her how many people she had given the same suggestion. Her answer: two. When I said I found meditation really helpful she said, “I just knew.”



FEEL THE LESSON: 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.



Do all sensations have a purpose, or are some experiences meaningless? In practicing Vipassana, do you find that everything that happens to us has a purpose, a meaning?

There is a purpose – but if you don't know what the purpose is, every sensation that arises is giving you this lesson: "Look, I am impermanent. I am coming to pass away." Don't get agitated because of it. Don't get overwhelmed because of it. You learn. Make this sensation into a tool, to change your habit pattern. In that way, all experiences are very purposeful.

If we don't know what the purpose is, then we get overwhelmed, and we keep on reacting, reacting. We make ourselves worse. This is our ignorance. The purpose of the vibration is good, to give us a warning. I am angry, and the vibration has started, because of that anger. That is a warning to me: "Look, don't be angry, otherwise you experience this, and this will multiply." Now, if I don't take any interest in that warning, I will harm myself. But a very good purpose is there, so you start observing it: "Well, look, the sensation has come because of my anger, let me see how long it lasts." I have made it a tool to come out of my anger.

Is there anything you want to emphasize about Vipassana?

Vipassana is nothing but an art of living. It should not be mixed with any religion, any dogma, any philosophy, any belief. All should be left aside. Vipassana is a code of conduct, a pure way for living a good life, a healthy life. It is good for oneself, and good for others. If Vipassana is taken that way – and that's the proper way to understand Vipassana – it will be very helpful.

But if it is seen with a colored lens – "Look, another religion has come, this is Buddhism, or this or that" – then one loses. Vipassana does not lose anything, those who are practicing Vipassana don't lose anything – but those who have such colored lenses will lose.

Vipassana should be taken as a science, a pure science of mind and matter which starts at a very apparent, gross level, but takes us to much deeper and subtler levels, even to a level which is pure mind and matter. That is the important thing, and it is a message for everybody. That's why it is not limited to any particular community, any particular religion, or any particular country. It is for all.

COURSES AND GROUP SITTINGS

Donaldson
Course Schedule 2018

May 4 to 15
(10-day Course)

August 24 to 28
(3-day Course)

October 19 to 30
(10-day Course)

Donaldson
Weekly Group Sitzings

Monday & Thursday
After Lunch
meet in the
ABE Classroom