



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

Volume VI – September 2014

WORDS OF DHAMMA

*Kanham dhammam vippahaya,
sukkam bhavetha pandito.
Oka anokamagama,
viveke yattha duramam.*

*Tatrabhiratimiccheyya,
hitva kame akiñcano.
Pariyodapeyya attanam,
cittaklesehi pandito.*

*Yesam sambodhiyangesu,
samma cittam subhavitam.
Adanapatinissagge,
anupadaya ye rata.
Khinasa jutimanto,
te loke parinibbuta.*

*Having abandoned the ways of darkness,
let the wise follow the light.
Having come from home to homelessness,
let him enjoy the bliss of solitude,
so difficult to achieve.*

*He should focus his mind upon that
exalted state (nibbana).
Having given up all sense pleasures,
possessing nothing, let the wise,
cleansing the mind from defilements,
purify the self.*

*Those whose minds are well fixed upon
the elements of enlightenment, who,
without craving for anything, glory in
renunciation, whose biases are
extinguished, who are full of light,
they indeed have attained the bliss of
nibbana in this very world.*

Dhammapada, VI, (87, 88, 89)

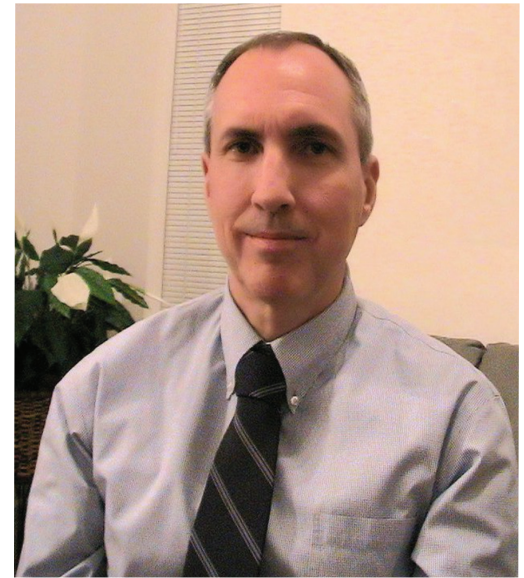
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www.prison.dhamma.org/en/na/*

Remembering Dr. Cavanaugh

When Dr. Ron Cavanaugh died in April he left an enduring lifeline for prisoners at William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility. Dr. Cavanaugh introduced the Vipassana meditation program into Donaldson. As a result, more than 200 prisoners have taken courses and begun changing their lives. Vipassana courses are now offered four times a year at Donaldson and the technique is practiced regularly by “old” students there.



Dr. Cavanaugh was the Director of Treatment for the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC). He was a highly skilled clinical psychologist dedicated to providing prisoners with a way to help themselves live better lives. In 2001, Dr. Cavanaugh heard that Vipassana meditation was being taught in a small number of prisons around the world and in one U.S. jail, and that it was helping the men and women who learned and practiced it.

A practical man, Dr. Cavanaugh was always looking for evidence that something actually worked. So, before recommending that ADOC offer courses and before encouraging prisoners to sign up, he took a 10-day Vipassana meditation course and learned all he could about the program.

Dr. Cavanaugh became convinced that Vipassana provides a clear, structured method for gaining control over compulsive thinking and impulsive behavior. He recognized that through Vipassana meditation courses, taught by authorized teachers, prisoners could learn how to make positive decisions, reduce stress, and lead happier and more peaceful lives.

Recognizing that the practice of Vipassana held great promise for inmates to help themselves, Dr. Cavanaugh convinced ADOC and Donaldson officials to start holding 10-day courses conducted by the Vipassana Prison Trust. He worked quietly and effectively with others to solve logistical problems such as providing vegetarian meals, delivering medications to students during courses, identifying the West Gym as a course site, and many others. Dr. Cavanaugh’s commitment and skill helped ensure that courses continue at Donaldson to this day.

The Path

The following is from a discourse given by Goenkaji on Day 2 of a 10-day course.

Understand what is the path on which you have started walking. Understand the Dhamma, the teaching, the law of nature. The Buddha explained it very simply: Abstain from all sinful, unwholesome actions; perform only pious, wholesome ones; keep purifying the mind. This is the teaching of enlightened ones.

It is a universal path, acceptable to people of any background. But the problem lies in defining sin and piety. When the essence of Dhamma is lost, it becomes a sect, and each sect gives a different definition of piety, such as having a particular external appearance, or performing certain rituals, or holding certain beliefs. All these are sectarian definitions, acceptable to some and not to others.

Dhamma, however, gives a universal definition of sin and piety. Any action that harms others, that disturbs their peace and harmony, is sinful and unwholesome. Any action that helps others, that contributes to their peace and harmony, is pious and wholesome. This is a definition in accordance not with any dogma but rather with the law of nature.

Abstaining from unwholesome action is *sila*, living a life of morality. The most wholesome action you can perform is to become master of your mind, and that is *samādhi*. And purifying the mind involves developing *paññā*, wisdom or insight through direct experience of the truth. These are the three trainings or steps on the path of Dhamma.

The first step is *sila*, moral conduct. That is, not performing any action that harms other beings. You begin with the understanding that you should not do to others anything you would not want to face yourself—whether physical violence, stealing, sexual assault, or lying and harsh speech. And since someone in a state of intoxication loses self-control and might start acting wrongly, you understand that you need to avoid all intoxicants.

A deeper understanding is that a human being is a social being, and it is impossible to enjoy peace and harmony while performing actions that cause disharmony in society, that poison the atmosphere in which everyone lives.

If you want peace and tranquility yourself, you need to foster a peaceful, tranquil atmosphere. Still more deeply, when someone experiences the law of nature, it becomes clear that you cannot perform a physical or vocal action to harm others without first generating negativity in the mind—anger, hatred, greed, passion or anything else. First an impurity arises in the mind, and by the law of nature you yourself start suffering now and you will suffer more in future. This is as true as the fact that if you put your hand in fire you will burn yourself. Naturally if you recognize this, you will decide not to burn yourself; you decide to abstain from unwholesome actions and perform wholesome ones.



Questions and Answers from Goenkaji

Question: Can we feel and enjoy things fully and still be equanimous?

Goenkaji: Certainly. Life is to enjoy wholesome things. But not with an attachment to anything. You remain equanimous and enjoy, so that when you miss it you smile: “I knew it was going away. It has gone away. So what?” Then only are you really enjoying life. Otherwise, you get attached, and if you miss it, you roll in misery. So no misery. In every situation be happy.

Question: How can we avoid addictions like smoking cigarettes?

Goenkaji: There are so many different types of addictions. When you practise Vipassana, you will understand that your addiction is not actually to that particular substance. It seems as if you are addicted to cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, paan (betel leaf). But actually, you are addicted to a particular sensation in the body, a bio-chemical flow caused by that particular substance. Similarly, when you are addicted to anger, passion, etc., these are also related to body sensations. Your addiction is to the sensations. Through Vipassana you come out of that addiction, all addictions. It is so natural, so scientific. Just try and you will experience how it works.

Why I Sit

Excerpt from an essay written by a long-time Vipassana student.

This morning the first thing I did was sit for an hour. I have done this for many years, and have spent many evenings, days and weeks doing the same. Why have I spent thousands of hours “sitting” and why have I made this activity (meditation) the center of my life?

I am interested in my mind and in my body. Previous to having cultivated the habit of sitting I had used my body as a tool in the world, to grip a pen or chop firewood, but I had never systematically, rigorously observed my body—what it feels like, not just with a shy fleeting glance, but moment after moment for hours and days at a time. Nor had I committed myself to observe the reciprocal influence of mind and body in states of exhaustion, rest, hunger, pain, relaxation, arousal, lethargy, or concentration.

I sit for, and with, an appreciation of daily life. I know how easily and recurrently my own life yields to distraction, irritation, tunnel vision. I do not want to miss my life the way I once missed a plane at LaGuardia Airport.

It may be ironic that simply to wiggle free of daydreams and worries I need a technique, a practice, a discipline—but I do. I have become increasingly convinced that being “at peace” is not a state of mind, but a state of mind and body.

Sitting is, among other things, the practice of self-control. While sitting one does not get up, or move, or make that dollar, or pass that test, or receive reassurance from that phone call.

Sitting rivets me on the psychological fact that death is life’s door. No power can save me. Because I am aware of death, and afraid, I lean my shoulder into living, not automatically and reactively like an animal, nor passively and pleadingly like a child pretending he has a father



watching over him, but with conscious choice and decision of what will constitute each fleeting moment of my life.

I sit to be myself, independent of my own or others’ judgments. Many years of my life were spent being rated, primarily in school, but also among friends and in social life. As much as I tried to fight off this form of addiction I got hooked anyway.

Today I find that sitting reveals the absurdity of comparative achievements. I am relieved to be more at home in myself, with myself. I complain less. I can lose discussions, hopes or self-expectations more easily. Without props or toys or comfort, without control of the environment, I have sat and observed who I am when there was no one and nothing to give me clues. It has happened that I have sat, asking for nothing, needing nothing, and felt full.

Sitting helps me overcome my deepest fears. I become freer to live from my heart, and to face the consequences, but also to reap the rewards of this authenticity. Much of what I called pain was really loneliness and fear. It passes, dissolves, with that observation.

I sit to find mental freedom. As I sit, a million thoughts cross my mind. But in keeping with the tradition passed on from ancient India’s great teachers, I attempt to let all of them go, to let them pass like clouds, like water, like time. There is no end to this job. I sit to find and express simple human love and common decency.

Question: How does one come out of inferiority/superiority complexes?

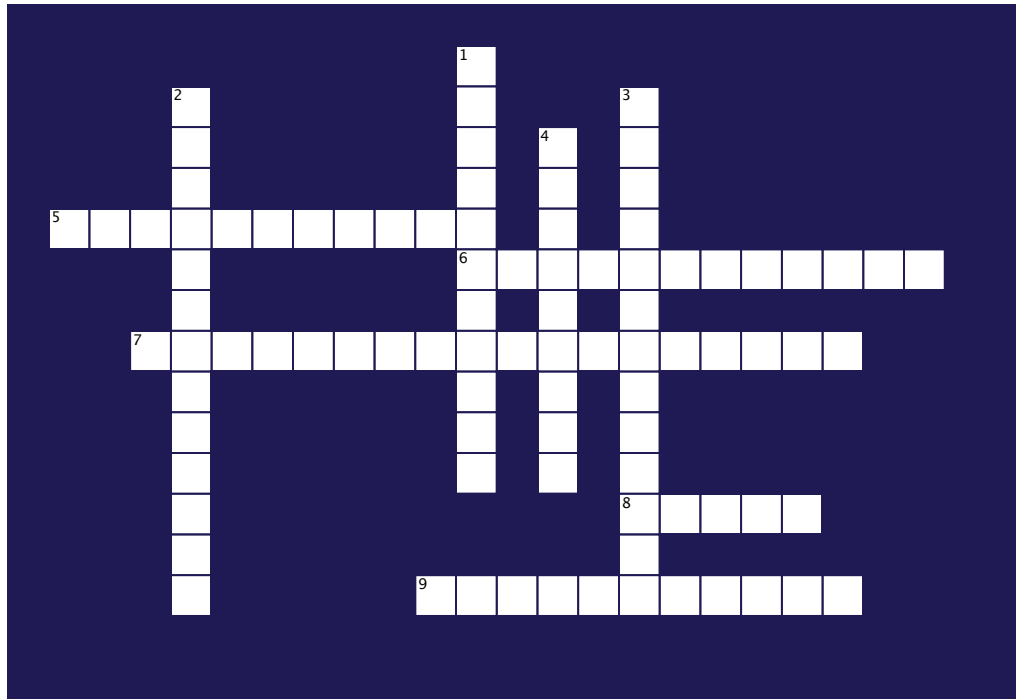
Goenkaji: This is what Vipassana does. Every complex is an impurity of the mind. As that impurity comes to the surface, you observe it at the level of body sensations. It passes away. It arises again. Again you observe. Again it passes away. Like this, these complexes weaken and ultimately do not rise again. Just observe. Suppression or expression is harmful. Vipassana helps one come out of all complexes.

Question: I am always full of anxiety. Can Vipassana help me?

Goenkaji: Certainly. This is the purpose of Vipassana—to liberate you from all miseries. Anxiety and worry are the biggest miseries, and they are there because of certain impurities deep within you. With practise of Vipassana, these impurities will come on the surface and gradually pass away. Of course, it takes time. There is no magic, no miracle, no gurudom involved. Somebody will just show you the correct path. You have to walk on the path, work out your own liberation from all miseries.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The path of Dhamma is called the Noble Eightfold Path, noble in the sense that anyone who walks on it is bound to become a noble-hearted, saintly person.



paññā right speech right action right livelihood right effort sammā-sati sammā-samādhi
right understanding sammā sankappa

Across

5. sammā-vāyāma: practicing diligently, in a balanced way
6. right concentration
7. sammā-diṭṭhi: comprehending reality as it is, not as it appears to be
8. The Noble Eightfold Path is divided into three parts: sīla, samādhi and
9. sammā-kammanta: conducting oneself in a moral manner

Down

1. sammā-vācā: abstaining from unwholesome language, backbiting, and idle chatter
2. sammā-ājīva: wholesome occupation
3. right thought
4. right awareness

Group Sitzings and Upcoming Courses

Donaldson Course Schedule 2014

September 4 to 8
(3-day Old Student Course)

October 23 to November 1
Satipatthana Sutta Course
(For old students who
meet specific requirements,
including having completed
three 10-day courses.)

Donaldson Weekly Group Sitzings

Thursdays
8:00 to 9:30 a.m.

