



VIPASSANA PRISON NEWSLETTER

March 2011

Volume 1, Issue 1

WORDS OF DHAMMA

**Atta-dīpa viharatha, attasaraṇā.
Anañña saraṇā**

**Dhamma-dīpa,
vihāratha, dhammasaraṇā
Anañña saraṇā**

**Make yourself an island,
make yourself your
refuge.**

There is no other refuge.

**Make truth your island,
make truth your refuge.**

There is no other refuge.

INSIDE THIS

ISSUE :

- > Donaldson hosts its 13th Vipassana course
- > Freedom for a Dhamma brother
- > Meditators' questions answered
- > The Dhamma Brothers travels the world
- > Upcoming Courses

The *Vipassana Prison Newsletter* is published by the Vipassana Prison Trust - a non-profit organization with charitable status.

The purpose of the trust is to promote the practice of Vipassana meditation in correctional facilities.

The trust is run by volunteers and funded by donations.

MESSAGE FROM GOENKAJI

Dear Travelers on the Path of Dhamma,

Be happy!

Keep the torch of Dhamma alight! Let it shine brightly in your daily life. Always remember, Dhamma is not an escape. It is an art of living: living in peace and harmony with oneself and also with all others. Hence, try to live a Dhamma life.

Don't miss your daily sittings each morning and evening. Whenever possible, attend weekly joint sittings with other Vipassana meditators.

Do a 10-day course as an annual retreat. This is essential to keep you going strong. With all confidence, face the spikes around you bravely and smilingly.

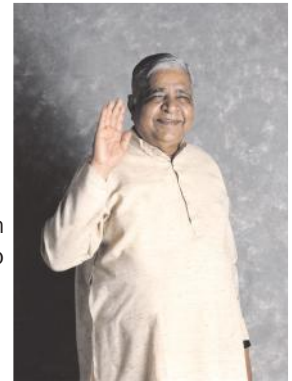
Renounce hatred and aversion, ill will and animosity.

Generate love and compassion, especially for those who do not understand Dhamma and are living an unhappy life.

May your Dhamma behavior show them the path of peace and harmony. May the glow of Dhamma on your faces attract more and more suffering people to this path of real happiness.

May all beings be happy, peaceful, liberated.

With all my metta,



S.N. Goenka is a retired businessman who learned Vipassana in Burma in the 1950s. In 1969 he moved to India, where his family came from, and began teaching Vipassana. People often call him "Goenkaji," which simply means "Mr. Goenka" in India. He learned English in school, and for many years he has used it to communicate with his students. This message was written by Goenkaji for the first Vipassana Newsletter in 1973.

ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

This is the first issue of the *Vipassana Newsletter* designed for meditators in correctional institutions.

Since 1997 there have been Vipassana courses

in U.S. prisons. Two films and one book tell the story of these courses for people in the outside world.

In this newsletter we want to talk to meditators who

are in institutions, who have learned Vipassana and want to keep meditating. We will try to present material that helps you and your practice.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following questions were posed to Goenkaji.

How can a truly spiritual person face this world?

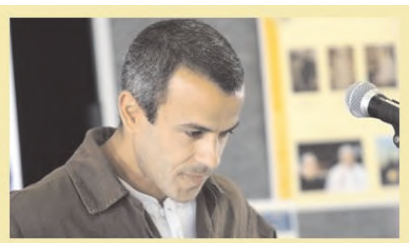
Don't try to change the world. Try to change yourself – the way in which you are reacting and making yourself miserable. For instance, when somebody is abusing you, understand that this person is miserable. It is the problem of that person. Why make it your problem? Why start generating anger and making yourself miserable? Doing that means you are not your own master, you are that person's slave; whenever that person wants to, he can make you miserable. Be your own master. Then you can live a good life, in spite of everything happening around you.

How does one escape anger?

With the practice of Vipassana! A Vipassana student observes respiration, or the bodily sensations caused when angry. This observation is with equanimity, with no reaction. The anger soon weakens and passes away. Through continued practice of Vipassana, the habit pattern of the mind to react with anger is changed.

A VOICE FROM INSIDE

Here is how the Vipassana experience seemed to Ya'acov, a student on the first prison course in Israel, speaking at the closing ceremony in 2006:



Before I tell you all the things I have to say, I want to express my thanks and gratitude to the warden and the commander. I really want to thank you for allowing this course to happen.

I also want to thank the wonderful people who went through the process with us: The instructors. It's the first time in my life that I feel that people came to take care of me. Maybe that was what helped me continue and not give up, because I thought: If people like that come to take care of me and give me the space to do my thing, I can't give up.

Let me share with you some of the process I went through.

I started sitting on the cushion, and tried to do what they told me to. It's hard to describe. I never imagined it was so difficult. Just observing my breathing, in and out. I felt I was fighting someone who wouldn't let me rest.

And that really connected me to my own life. I never knew how to look at the here and now. I always looked at the future, which was unknown, or at the past, which was already gone. I gave up. Each time I ran into some difficulty, I ran away.

And the same goes for the mind. I try to bring it back, tame it, tell it: "Listen to the breathing, don't take me back there again." It goes there, I bring it back. It goes there, I bring it back...

And slowly, with great determination

Suffering, war and conflict are as old as history. Do you really believe in a world of peace?

Well, even if a few people come out of misery, it is good. When there is darkness all around and one lamp has started giving light, it is good. And like this, if one lamp becomes ten lamps, or twenty lamps, the darkness will get dispelled here and there. There is no guarantee that the entire world will become peaceful, but as much peace as you can make yourself, that much you are helping the peace of the world.

What is metta?

Metta or Mettā-Bhāvāna is the technique of generating vibrations of goodwill and compassion that a Vipassana student is first taught on the tenth day of a ten-day Vipassana course. Later, at the end of every Vipassana course, or a one-hour sitting, a meditator is asked to practice metta, to share the merits gained with all beings.

great effort and great persistence, you somehow manage to balance things a bit, and succeed in doing it for a bit longer.

Maybe only when I finished I realized how good this is, how happy I am to have completed this course. So many things are clearer to me now: That you actually have to learn to live life, to deal with what happens to you. And that other people and the environment are not the problem. You yourself are your problem.

And if you don't learn to look within and see what's happening, you'll always be running away, you'll never be in the reality.

There was a sentence at the end of the day, that the spiritual teacher Goenka would say: "May all living creatures be happy." And that is really what I wish for you all. Thank you.

FREEDOM FOR A DHAMMA BROTHER

Omar Rahman was one of the original Dhamma Brothers. He participated in all the Vipassana courses at Donaldson and helped out in different ways. Outside Donaldson, people got to know about Omar particularly by reading *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*.

When the April 2009 course took place, Omar was staying in the prison infirmary. He was suffering from advanced liver cancer. More than half a year before, doctors had told him that he had six months to live.

Despite this, Omar was happy to know that another course was happening at Donaldson. Even though he was very weak, he resolved to be there.

For the first six days, leaning on a cane, Omar walked from the infirmary to meditate for a few hours in the interview room in the gym.

He would sometimes be dizzy and shaking with weakness, but he was determined.

During this time, one of the inmates helping on the course was going through difficulties. Although Omar could barely hold a spoon to eat, he talked to this man each day and helped him deal with the problems. To his last, Omar was guiding and inspiring others.

During his months in the infirmary, Omar used to say that he was not going to die in prison. In fact, a new Alabama state law allows for the release of certain prisoners with a terminal illness. This provision had yet to be used. But on the seventh day of the course, Omar was taken in a wheelchair to his sister's car, and drove out with her from the gates of Donaldson.

The next day his wish came

true. Omar died peacefully in his sleep at his sister's home, a free man.

At the course graduation ceremony, many of the students spoke about how much Omar had meant to them. He had really touched and moved many people in Donaldson, and many others beyond.

In a 2006 letter, Omar described the impact of Vipassana on his life.

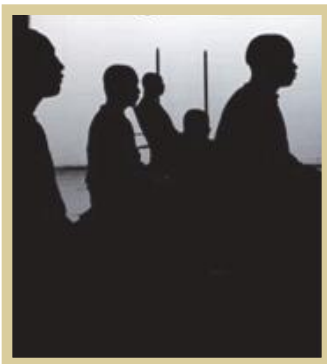
"As an Imam and having taken the Vipassana course, I began to emphasize the importance of being observant and attentive," he wrote. "For instance, the Quran constantly mentions the importance of being mindful and observant of what is in the heart. Prior to the Vipassana course, these were words of wisdom. After Vipassana these words became a practice."



Omar Rahman

"As an Imam and having taken the Vipassana course, I began to emphasize the importance of being observant and attentive."

THE DHAMMA BROTHERS TRAVEL THE WORLD



Meditators at Donaldson may not be able to travel in person. But through *The Dhamma Brothers* film, they are helping people around the world to discover Vipassana.

The film was recently shown to small groups in Ottawa (the capital of Canada) and Addis Ababa

(the capital of Ethiopia). Showings are also planned in Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia – another country that regularly has prison courses.

The reaction is not always what you might expect. In Ethiopia, for example, people commented on

how luxurious Donaldson looked!

What impresses people most is to hear that courses are happening now in Donaldson, that inmates are serious about practicing Vipassana. This gives a lot of inspiration and hope.

DONALDSON HOSTS ITS 13TH VIPASSANA COURSE

This January, the Donaldson Correctional Facility hosted its thirteenth 10-day Vipassana course. A total of 24 men completed the course, including eight “old students”—people who had done a course before. The old students provided a strong guiding hand to the new students simply by their silent, consistent effort.

This is a strong inspiration to the new students who realize that they too can sit in an attentive posture and work hard for 10 days. The support team working inside and outside the gym included another four Donaldson inmates who were also old students of Vipassana.

Once again the site for the course was the West Gym. It’s not easy to spend 10 days using the same small space for eating, sleeping and meditating. But from the start the gym seemed to return to the meditation atmosphere of all the previous courses there. And most important, the students quickly got down to serious work.

Throughout the day the students had to meditate in the hall, although they could take short breaks if needed. They kept coming back to their cushion and “starting again.” This says a

lot about their determination and strength of character. Their work is inspiring to the free world servers who come to conduct the course.

There are now over 150 Donaldson inmates who have completed at least one 10-day course. Many have completed two or more courses. In a maximum-security facility like this, it’s tough to continue meditating outside of courses. But some of the old students are making determined efforts to carry on.

In a broader picture, the prison administration is seeing a ripple effect from the Vipassana courses. Old students have begun to provide services beyond the meditation to help their fellow inmates. Some are volunteering to mentor other inmates in reading skills, some have initiated an art class to focus on outlets for their creative energy and others have initiated a hospice program in the infirmary to stay with inmates from Donaldson and from other prisons as they experience their last days. Compassion for other people is one of the more measurable aspects of development in Vipassana Meditation.

Plans are now being developed for future courses at Donaldson.

WORDS YOU MIGHT HEAR IN A VIPASSANA COURSE

Vipassana meditation comes from the teaching of the Buddha. Centuries ago that teaching was written down in India in the Pali language. This was probably the language spoken by the Buddha, or very close to it. Some of the words we often use in Vipassana are Pali words. Here are a few explained:

Vipassana ~ Insight, seeing the truth inside.

Bhāvāna ~ Meditation, development.

Buddha ~ Enlightened person. Anyone who has found the way out of suffering.

Dhamma (Also sometimes **Dharma**) ~ Nature, truth, law, law of liberation – that is, the teaching of an enlightened person.

Mettā ~ Loving kindness, goodwill. A type of meditation that develops goodwill for all, taught at the end of a Vipassana course.

Goenkaji says that sitting together with other Vipassana meditators is a way to “recharge your battery.” Maybe you’ve been going through a rough time; maybe it’s hard to keep meditating on your own. But it can help if you get together with other Vipassana meditators and spend an hour in silent meditation.

GROUP SITTINGS AT DONALDSON

Mondays 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm

Thursdays 9:30 pm – 11:00 pm

Saturdays 9:00 am – 2:00 pm

Location: The East Therapy Room

2011 COURSES AT DONALDSON

March 17 -- 28

May 12 -- 23

September 1 -- 5 (3-day Old Student Course)

October 20 -- 31

May all beings be happy!