

VIPASSANA Prison Newsletter

WORDS OF DHAMMA

*Yassa selupamam cittam,
thitam nanupakampati,
virattam rajaniyesu,
kopaneyye na kuppati:
Yassevam bhavitam cittam,
kuto tam dukkhamessati?*

*Whose mind is like rock,
steady, unmoved, dispassionate
for things that spark passion,
unangered by things that spark anger:
When one's mind is developed
like this, from where can there
come suffering and stress?*

Udana 4.34

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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.



S.N. Goenka is a retired businessman who first learned Vipassana from Sayagi U Ba Khin in the 1950s in Burma. In 1969 he moved to India, his parents' homeland, and began teaching this ancient technique in the land of its origin. From there it spread around the world. Today, more than 100,000 people per year take Vipassana courses at meditation centers established under Mr. Goenka's guidance in Asia, the Americas, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. People often call him "Goenkaji," which simply means "Mr. Goenka" in India.

arises in our minds overpowers us - makes us its prisoner so quickly! We start suffering immediately. This is not limited to the area inside these prison walls. People inside this jail or outside this jail are all prisoners of their own habit patterns. They keep generating one negativity or the other, and they keep on suffering.

If we are relieved of these negativities, we start enjoying the true happiness of liberation. We start enjoying real peace, real harmony. When our minds are freed from impurities, the entire habit pattern of our life changes. A pure mind is naturally full of love and compassion, infinite love and compassion; full of joy, sympathetic joy; and full of equanimity of mind. This is real happiness, real peace, real harmony.

The bondage of mental defilements is a universal bondage. And the happiness of liberation from these negativities is also universal. Whether one is a Hindu or Muslim, Jain or Buddhist, Christian or Jew, Sikh or Parsi – it makes no difference. Anyone who comes out of this bondage starts to enjoy peace and harmony.

The technique is so scientific, so results-oriented, so non-sectarian. It brings you the message of liberation, the message of peace and harmony. May all of you who participate in this camp work diligently, patiently and persistently, to come out of your bondages, all your miseries. May a new era start in your lives. May Dhamma bring you full liberation.

May you all enjoy real peace, real harmony.

Message for Prisoners

The following message from Goenkaji was played at Tihar Prison in January 1994.

Friends:

You have all assembled here to liberate yourselves, liberate yourselves from all bondages, all miseries. To be imprisoned in prisons like this is a great agony. And to be liberated from prison is very fortunate. But besides the confinement within these four walls, there is a greater prison in which all of us suffer so much. This is the prison of our own negativities, our own mental defilements, which keep overpowering us.

We have become the slaves of our own anger, hatred, ill will, animosity; slaves of our defilements of craving, clinging, greed, passion, attachment, ego. Any defilement that arises in our minds overpowers us - makes us its prisoner so quickly! We start suffering immediately. This is not limited to the area inside these prison walls. People inside this jail or outside this jail are all prisoners of their own habit patterns. They keep generating one negativity or the other, and they keep on suffering.

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Prison # 407



“Mongolian Prison #407” is the name of the only prison for women in the country of Mongolia. Located about 20 miles outside of Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaan Bataar, the prison houses about 280 female inmates, who come from all over the country. The grounds look stark and barren, the weather is harsh and the women work very hard. Water for every purpose has to be hauled in buckets because there is almost no running water, and heating fuel con-

sists of wood that has to be chopped, stacked and carried. Nevertheless, the sounds of soft Mongolian songs and laughter can often be heard on the prison grounds, and the warmth and enthusiasm of the inmates for Vipassana is inspirational.

There have been three 10-day Vipassana courses in the last few years. Sixty-nine women, including 15 old students successfully completed the last course in June, 2007.

Two women Teachers from the North American Vipassana Prison Trust came to Mongolia to conduct the course, which was in Mongolian and English, with two outside servers and a translator assisting.

There were many requests for more courses. The Vipassana program currently is suspended, because of a change in the prison administration, but the inmate students have made it clear that they look forward to the day when Vipassana courses return to their prison. In the meantime, old students are trying their best to continue their own meditation practices.

What is the VPT?

The Vipassana Prison Trust (VPT) is a non-profit, all-volunteer organization appointed in 2002 by Vipassana Teacher S.N. Goenka with a mandate to offer Vipassana meditation courses to incarcerated men and women in North America.

The volunteers who make up the Vipassana Prison Trust do this so that inmates can change their lives during and after their incarceration; so that correctional institutions may run more safely and effectively; and so that corrections personnel may work in a less stressful environment.

The VPT offers to inmates the same 10-day courses that are provided to people at centers all over the

world. Trained volunteer staff works with institutional personnel to prepare a course site within the unique conditions of a correctional environment. At the time of the course, a Vipassana teacher



and course assistants will remain within the facility providing instruction and support day and night, for the full ten days.

Behind the scenes, VPT members and supporters provide the volunteer training and coordination needed for each and every course. Members also do what is necessary to assure that the VPT remains

accessible, accountable, and makes best use of the resources it has. The VPT consists of people from all walks of life – men and women of all ages, ethnici-

ties, and religious beliefs with jobs, families and full lives.

The one thing we all have in common is our practice of Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr. Goenka. All members of the organization, including course personnel, Trust members, directors, and consultants work on their own time with no remuneration of any kind. The VPT has no political, social or ideological agenda. As meditators in this tradition, we serve in this way for our own benefit – to develop the qualities and attributes that help us progress in our own practice. Our service, whether it is directly with inmates or behind the scenes, is given with gratitude for this opportunity.

Independence Day for Rick Smith



Last spring, as final preparations were being made for May's 10-day Vipassana course in the West Gym, Rick Smith lay in the hospice section of the Donaldson infirmary suffering from the last stages of Hepatitis C. He was weak and in great pain. Liver failure had yellowed his skin. But he still had a smile for visitors.

Rick Smith passed away on July 4th, Independence Day. During his time at Donaldson, he had engendered the affection and respect of many. In his own words: "I am so fortunate to live the life I lead."

Rick was one of the earliest students of Vipassana at Donaldson, having sat his first course in May 2002. He continued his practice and was instrumental in setting up the early courses and group sittings. Friends speak of his generosity, the encouragement he offered to those in need, and his ability to put people at ease.

Many will remember his sense of humor. Dr. Allen, head psychologist at Donaldson, remembers how Rick made people laugh even as he was making final arrangements at his end-of-life conference. "Life is hilarious!" Rick

once said, "The freedom to laugh at my own pettiness and peculiar habits and idiosyncrasies and not take everything so personal. What a boon!"

Among the people who recall Rick's positive effect on their lives is Bonita Johnson, Supervisor of Drug Treatment at Donaldson, who knew Rick for 13 years. He helped her establish the drug dorm and, with her encouragement, led therapy workshops for other inmates. She notes that, despite his life-without-parole sentence, he "just had a way of making everyone feel better."

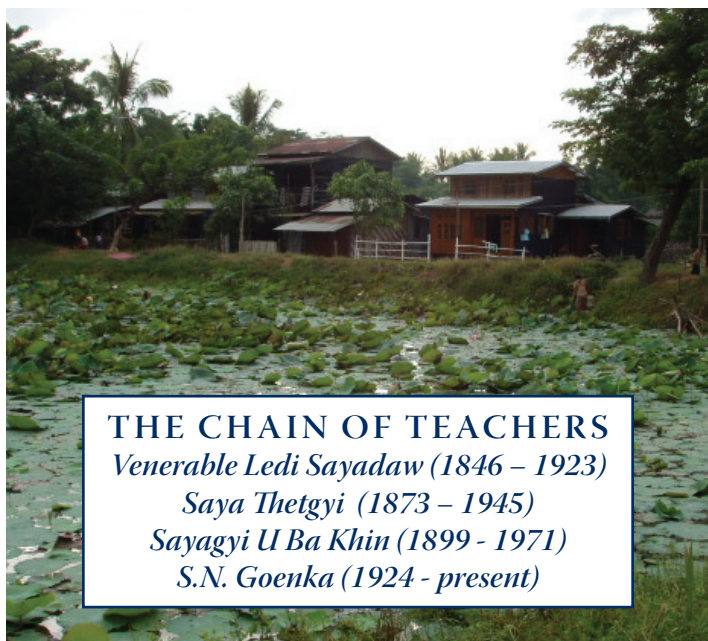
Rick found out that he had terminal Hepatitis C two and a half years ago. After a brief period of grief, he returned to a routine of committed service. He continued to meditate, lead workshops, and worked

on a prison newspaper up to the last three months of his life when he had to be moved into the infirmary hospice. Practicing Vipassana during his final months reportedly helped him face the pain and discomfort of his illness.

Rick's contributions and efforts will be remembered and appreciated. "My goal is simple: to enjoy an equanimous mind so that I can experience liberation... I will sit one hour two times a day, morning and evening. I will let the light of Vipassana shine in my life and not worry about tomorrow or anything else. I will surrender to the Dhamma. A simple path... breath and sensation. I will keep it light. Be happy, peaceful...liberated!" *

**From Letters from the Dhamma Brothers by Jenny Phillips (Pariyatti Press, 2008)*

Overcoming Adversity



THE CHAIN OF TEACHERS
Venerable Ledi Sayadaw (1846 – 1923)
Saya Thetgyi (1873 – 1945)
Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899 - 1971)
S.N. Goenka (1924 - present)

In 1903—the same year the Wright brothers conducted the first powered flight and the Boston Red Sox won the first-ever World Series—a personal tragedy led a humble farmer in Burma to seek a way out of suffering, thereby setting in motion events that reverberate to the present time.

Saya Thetgyi (pronounced sa-YA-ta-ji) was an uneducated farmer who grew up poor in a small Burmese village called Pyawbwegyi. It may seem unlikely that such a person would one day become a renowned Vipassana teacher and a key link in the chain of teachers who preserved and disseminated this valuable technique so that we can receive it today in its pristine purity. Like many of us, Saya Thetgyi came in contact with Vipassana after experiencing great suffering.

On his farm, Saya Thetgyi grew rice like most of his neighbors, planting by hand and preparing the soil with

the help of water buffaloes. His village, which lay across the river from the capital Rangoon, was a beautiful and peaceful place to live.

This peace and harmony was shattered in 1903 when a cholera epidemic broke out, killing many villagers, including Saya Thetgyi's own son and daughter. It is said that his daughter, who was very dear to him, died in his arms.

Overcome with grief, Saya Thetgyi could find no solace, and finally decided to leave his village in search of a path out of suffering. After several years of wandering across Burma, he came in touch with the renowned monk, Ledi Sayadaw, who taught him Vipassana.

For seven years, Saya Thetgyi practiced with Ledi Sayadaw. Villagers tell the story of how Saya Thetgyi one day arrived back in Pyawbwegyi to check on his family and farm. As he entered the village he saw a memorial to his daughter and burst into tears. He realized that he had not overcome his attachment to his children and the suffering of losing them. Moreover, he understood that he had to continue meditating in earnest to liberate himself.

Saya Thetgyi made rapid progress in his meditation and eventually the Venerable Sayadaw appointed him to teach Vipassana: "Here, my great pupil, take my staff and go... You have been successful. From today onwards, you must teach the Dhamma of *rupa* and *nama* (mind and matter) to six thousand people." The Sayadaw also exhorted the community of monks, "Those of you who wish to practice meditation, follow him. Learn the technique from him and practice."

Initially, it was difficult for Saya Thetgyi to fulfill his teacher's wish, because people did not believe that a layperson had sufficient knowledge to teach meditation. But soon word spread of the technique's efficacy, and people started to come to Saya Thetgyi's farm where he had built a small meditation hall, to learn Vipassana and come out of suffering.

At times there were up to 200 people on courses, among them monks, nuns, manual laborers and even government officials. One official who came to learn Vipassana was Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who later became Goenkaji's teacher. So, in a sense, Saya Thetgyi is Goenkaji's "Dhamma grandfather" and our "Dhamma great-grandfather."

"To one who experiences sensations, meditators, I teach the truth of suffering, I teach the truth of the arising of suffering, I teach the truth of the cessation of suffering and I teach the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering."
- *Anguttara Nikaya*

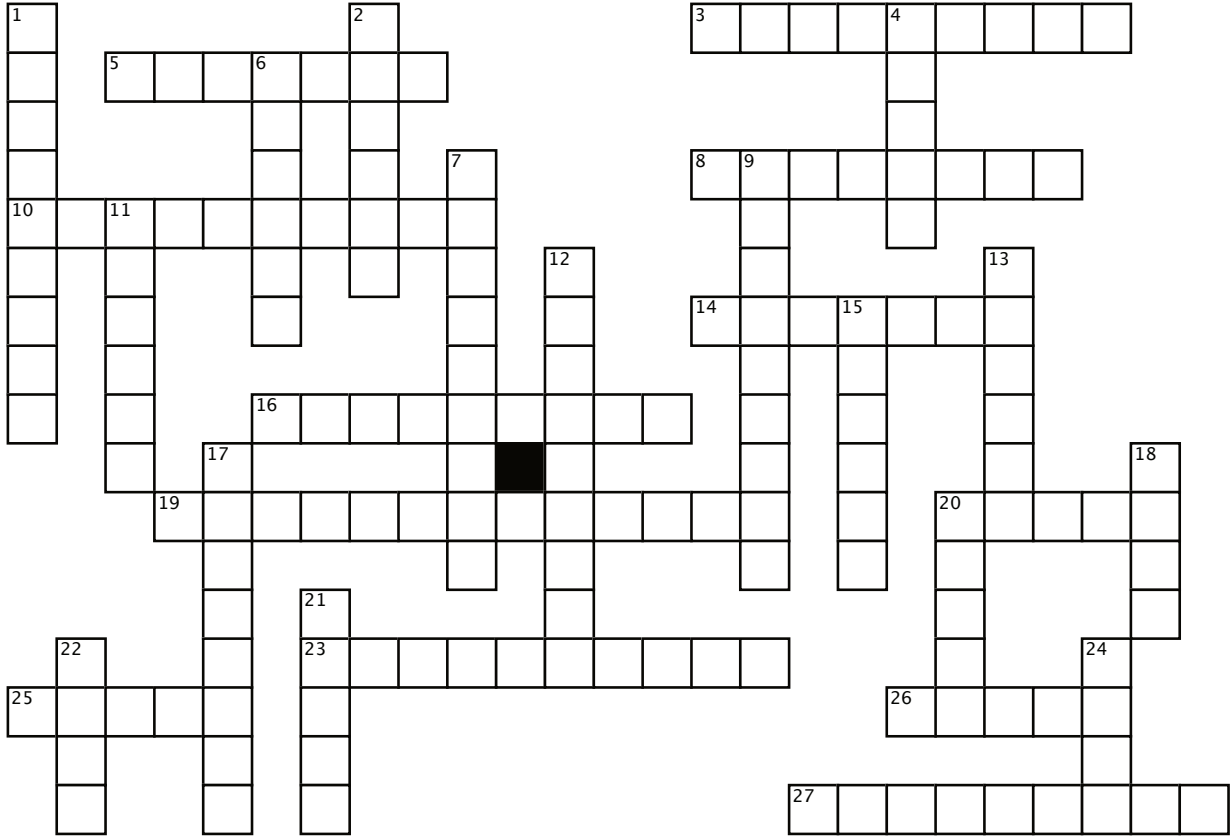
The understanding that suffering exists is the first Noble Truth. But, if we merely accept the reality of suffering, we still would not find a way out of it. Only when we explore and directly experience all Four Noble Truths, including the

cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and walk the path that leads to the end of suffering, can we, like Saya Thetgyi, start to find a way out of the prisons of our minds.



Pots of rice in Pyawbwegyi village.

Pariyatti Crossword No.1



**sutta Buddha dāna vipassanā pāramī concentration nibbāna morality
four equanimity adhiṭṭāna saṅkhāra ānāpāna suffering paṭipatti
Siddhattha Pāli anattā sensation bodhi pariyatti saṅgha dhamma
mettā taṇhā paññā Eightfold saññā**

Across

- 3. Noble _____ Path
- 5. awareness of respiration
- 8. mental formation
- 10. personal name of the Buddha
- 14. no mind, no matter
- 16. vedanā
- 19. samādhi
- 20. perception
- 23. no reaction, balance
- 25. the tree of enlightenment
- 26. wisdom
- 27. dukkha

Down

- 1. to see thing as they are
- 2. no self
- 4. craving
- 6. ten _____
- 7. theory of meditation
- 9. strong determination
- 11. Buddha, _____, Saṅgha
- 12. practice of meditation
- 13. community of Noble Ones
- 15. Enlightened One
- 17. sīla
- 18. charity
- 20. discourse of the Buddha
- 21. loving-kindness
- 22. number of Noble Truths
- 24. language of the Buddha

Donaldson Course Update

This May, the Donaldson Correctional Facility hosted its fifteenth 10-day Vipassana course. A total of 20 men completed the course including five “old students” (those who have completed a 10-day course before) and 15 new students. Another five old students gave 10 days of their time to assist the volunteer course manager.

As has now become standard, the course site was the West Gym, which, for the 10 days the course was in session, could rightly be termed, the “Donaldson Vipassana Center.” For several days prior to the course, old student volunteers worked together to transform the empty shell of the gym into a dining hall, student and teacher residences, and a meditation or “Dhamma” hall. Seeing a great deal of hard work completed so harmoniously inspires those who witness this transformation in action.

Donaldson Course Schedule 2012

February 2 –13

March 15 – 26

May 3 –14

August 30 – Sept 3
(3-day Old Student Course)

When so many people share such a small space for eating, sleeping, and bathing, difficulties are bound to arise, but the students handled these challenges with fortitude, and stayed focused on their primary task of following the instructions and meditating. When huge storms caused rain to pour

through leaks in the roof and onto the students’ beds, the volunteer servers thought students would ask to leave the course. However, students only asked permission to move their mattresses to a drier part of the gym!

One of the unique features of Vipassana, both at Donaldson and at courses around the world, is observing Noble Silence. Because the experience of so many courses shows that meditators work best in an atmosphere of silence, students are asked to abstain from any kind of communication with fellow students, be it vocal or physical, through eye-contact, glances, or gestures.



In the beginning at Donaldson, this was a real challenge, with the result that courses were sometimes disrupted. But over time, both old and new students have come to recognize the value of observing Noble Silence, and the support it provides for the deep internal work they are doing. Consequently, courses have become more serious and the atmosphere more conducive to meditation. The May course was no exception.

This past year has been notable for the number of students who have returned to participate in multiple courses. Having gotten a taste of the positive changes in their lives, a number of students have attended two, three, even four courses in the last year, to work seriously and become established in the technique. Many note a reduction in negative reactions and behaviors, and an increased ability to deal with the agitating situations

that often create difficulties in the close quarters of Donaldson.

With a newly ramped-up schedule of four 10-day courses and one 3-day old student course a year, more and more Donaldson inmates are able to take courses, leading to measur-

able positive change, both in the courses at the “Donaldson Meditation Center” and in the wider community of the correctional facility.

Donaldson Group Sittings

Location: East Therapy Room

Mondays 12:30 – 2:00 pm

Thursdays 9:00 – 10:30 pm

Saturdays 8:00 – 1:00 pm

Questions and Answers (The following questions were posed to Goenkaji.)

Question: I can't suppress my anger, even if I try. What should I do?

Goenkaji: Don't suppress it. Observe it. The more you suppress it, the more it goes to the deeper levels of your mind. The complexes become stronger and stronger, and it so difficult to come out of them. No suppression, no expression. Just observe.

Question: How can the mind remain balanced when we are in pain?

Goenkaji: Whenever something happens in the external world that we do not like, there are unpleasant sensations in the body. A Vipassana meditator focuses the entire attention on these sensations without reacting, just observing them very objectively. It is very difficult in the beginning, but slowly it becomes easier to observe the gross unpleasant sensations – what we call pain – with a balanced, calm mind. Pleasant, unpleasant, makes no difference. Every sensation arises only to pass away. Why react to something that is so ephemeral?