



# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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## WORDS OF DHAMMA

Māvamaññetha puññassa, "Na mantam āgamiṣṣati." Udabindunipātena udakumbhopi pūrati.  
Dhīro pūrati puññassa, thokam thokampi ācinam.

Think not lightly of good, saying, "It will not come to me." Drop by drop is the water pot filled.  
Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.

*Dhammapada 9.122*

## YES, WE CAN LESSEN OUR FEAR AND DESPAIR

From the website of the California Vipassana center.

When the pandemic struck, Vipassana centers around the world worked hard to help more. Some set up online group meditation sessions; others allowed meditators to send questions to assistant teachers and teachers. Here is the answer one Vipassana teacher gave to a powerful question.

*Q: How can Vipassana help in an uncertain and fearful time like this Covid-19 pandemic?*

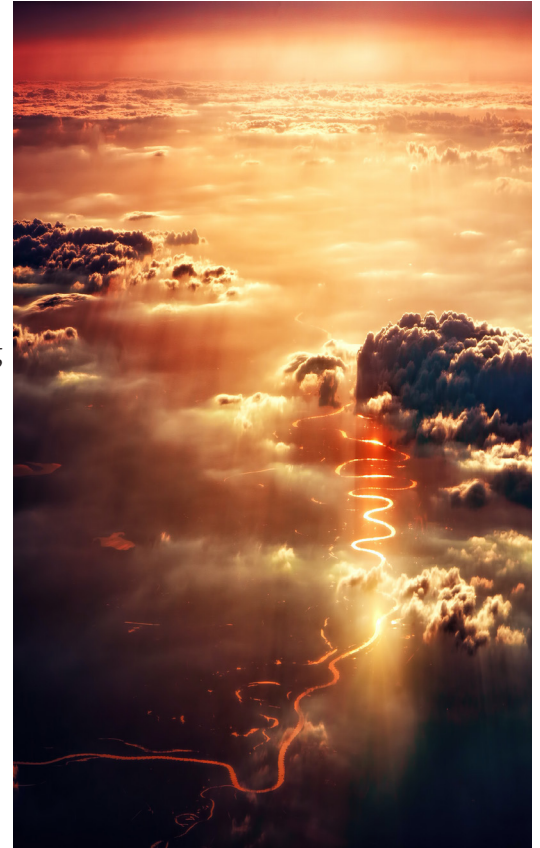
A: A virus is contagious. Likewise, fear is contagious as well. We may become carriers of the virus; we don't have to be carriers of fear. Arresting our own inner fears so that we do not become carriers of it is a significant contribution Vipassana practitioners can make to all those around us at this time.

Media inundates us with fearmongering. At every turn obsessive fear of impending doom from without and within clouds us, impedes right understanding and leads to wrong decisions and even to paralysis where we don't know what to do to protect ourselves. This triggers our own inner fears and insecurities. In the course of Vipassana practice we have the chance to stop, weaken, and ultimately eradicate fear. But this is only possible via our practice of Vipassana. While meditating, when worry, fear or dread arise in the mind in the form of thoughts and emotions it is critical that we remain aware of the accompanying sensations, recognizing their inescapable evidence of impermanence. The more we become adept at doing this the more we undo the tendency of mind to dwell and react upon counter-productive ideas that produce nothing but suffering and unhappiness.

A pandemic shouldn't distract us from these fundamentals. As human beings throughout our lives we will cycle incessantly between good and bad health, wellness and sickness, until we die. Ignorant, wild swings of behavior accompany the extremes of each: in youthful exuberance we feel carefree and take risks, thinking ourselves somehow immortal. As adults in the throes of illness we over-react with despair, thinking our suffering is somehow unique and endless.

"Yikes, it must be cancerous." "Yikes, surely I've got the Covid-19 virus!"

The hallmark of each of these extremes is the absence of the awareness of the truth of impermanence. Dhamma practice is the only remedy to correct and undo the effects of this deep-seated ignorance. We are going to become ill at some point and we will recover until we don't. Reasonable precautions to safeguard health by definition are those undertaken with a balanced mind. We obtain a balanced mind increasingly when we purify it with the practice of Vipassana.



## UNTYING KNOTS OF MISPERCEPTION AROUND RACE

Reprinted from the Northeast (U.S.) Vipassana Newsletter, April 2021

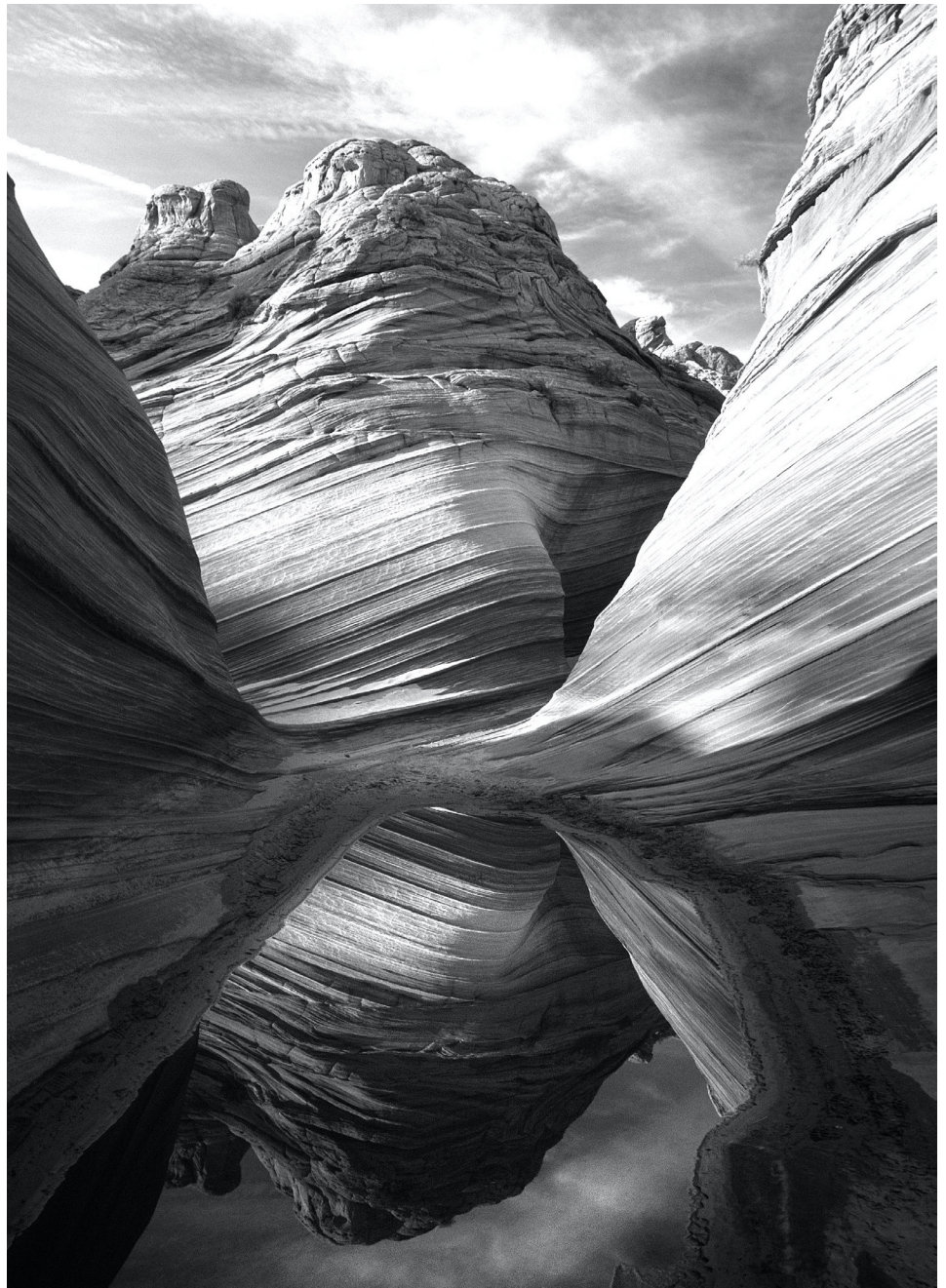
Race was a hotly debated issue in the Buddha's time. His view is still important today. How are we to respond to the racially charged events that have swept across the United States, exposing long-standing racial disparities?

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha denounced discrimination and all the systemic practices by which we degrade our fellow human beings. In a number of discourses in the Tipitaka (a collection of ancient teachings) the Buddha criticized the caste system, which was the expression of supremacist thinking that prevailed in his lifetime in ancient India. Under this system, members of the brahman caste considered themselves superior to all others. They believed that their privileged status derived from their birth and skin color.

The Buddha instead maintained that only purity of mind defined a true brahman. On one occasion, a brahman attempted to insult the Buddha by calling him an outcast. The Buddha replied that simply being born into privilege does not make anyone a superior person, and that true "outcasts" are not determined by their birth or station in life. According to the Buddha, the only way to measure someone's superiority was by the purity of that person's mental, verbal and physical actions.

If brahmins engaged in unwholesome behavior, the Buddha said, they were the real outcasts. There are brahmins born in a family devoted to the scriptures, in a clan of reciters of the sacred hymns, who often are seen performing unwholesome deeds. In this life they are blameworthy, and misery awaits them in the next. High birth does not save them from a future of pain, nor from censure. The Buddha concluded: "Not by birth is one an outcast, not by birth is one a brahman. By deeds one becomes an outcast, by deeds one becomes a brahman."

Greed, hatred and ignorance all feed systemic racism. They perpetually condition both the oppressor and the oppressed. The Buddha's answer for becoming free of these impurities of mind was the practice of mental purification we call Vipassana meditation. By observing the constantly changing sensations within ourselves, we learn not to react to them. As we apply this lesson in ordinary life, we cease to react and stop behaving in ways that harm others and ourselves.





On another occasion, two brahmins discussed with the Buddha whether birth or virtuous conduct made someone a brahmin. The Buddha noted that insects of each species are born with features that distinguish them from other insect species, and the same is true of other creatures. But no inborn differences justify assigning human beings to different castes or groups, he said. In other creatures there are differences separating them into different species, but among human beings there are no such differences... neither in hands nor feet, not in fingers or nails, neither in knees nor thighs, not in their color, not in sound – there are no inborn marks that assign humans to different categories. In individual human bodies, such differences cannot be found. The distinctions we make between humans are mere names assigned by convention alone.

Here the Buddha held that there are no significant differences between humans, including skin color. This was a prescient statement. Millennia later, scientists have confirmed that there is no biological basis for racial differences.

Another time there was a debate between a young brahmin named Assalayana and the Buddha. The young man challenged the Buddha's teaching that caste does not determine someone's true worth as a person. Instead, Assalayana asserted the traditional view that brahmins are superior because of their light skin color, their supposed purity and their claimed special connection with the supreme deity.

As he often did, the Buddha responded with a long series of questions; these forced Assalayana to re-examine his assumptions. Step by step, the discussion led Assalayana to recognize that neither parentage nor caste nor knowledge of scriptures nor the practice of rites and rituals can determine a person's worth. Instead, what matters is the quality of an individual's mental, vocal and physical actions. People who perform unwholesome actions degrade themselves; people who strive to perform wholesome actions raise themselves up. Distinctions based on anyone's color or descent have no validity whatsoever.

Vipassana meditation addresses unconscious perceptions, including bias and prejudice. After all, these are simply forms of aversion toward one object and clinging toward another. With awareness of the breath and sensations, which are both natural objects of reality, we understand by experience that these objects are not White, Black or Brown; neither Asian, African nor European; neither Tanzanian nor Filipino nor Scandinavian.

Such insights into the ultimate reality, however, do not negate our conventional identities. Through practice, we may experience ourselves as masses of bubbles arising and passing away. But we also acknowledge our worldly identities of name, gender, culture and so on. Both ultimate reality and conventional truth are valid. Many of us carry multiple identities, some involving privilege and others oppression. It is important to acknowledge all of them and try to understand their impermanent nature.

The equanimity that we develop by practicing Vipassana allows us to explore our racial conditioning with compassion and tolerance. It enables us to observe our emotions with balance in challenging conversations about race.

Vipassana liberates us moment by moment, until we reach the ultimate liberation of the mind. This is a step-by-step process, and our progress in meditation should be reflected in how we live our lives.

Among the mental impurities that are most difficult to uproot are the bias and prejudice that underlie racism. The practice of self-observation can help us eliminate the unconscious reactions on which bias and prejudice are based. Vipassana can give us the courage to acknowledge our own failings and strive to do better.

Individually and as an organization, Vipassana can support our effort to get rid of barriers; the effort to become more inclusive of people of all races, identities and backgrounds; the effort to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere in which everyone can receive the Dhamma.

## THE WISE CHOOSE TO GROW WHAT IS GOOD

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, October 2013.

*Following is a story told by S.N. Goenka in the closing discourse of a 10-day course. It has been lightly edited for publication.*

An old man in our country, a very rich man, became a widower. The old lady passed away. And the housewife was the owner of everything – money, jewelry, property, everything.

Now the old lady had gone. And it was a joint family. He had four sons and four daughters-in-law. He couldn't give the bunch of keys to everyone, he had to choose one. So he called them and said, "I will examine you. This bunch of keys will be given to the one who gets the highest mark."

What would he do to examine them? He gave five grains of corn to each daughter-in-law and said, "I will come after four years. You have to preserve these five grains. If you cannot take care of five grains, how can you take care of all the money, the jewelry, the granary, etc.? This is your examination." And the old man went away.

The eldest daughter-in-law thought, "The old man has gone crazy! For four years, why should I worry about those valueless five grains? I'd better throw them away. When he comes back, I'll take another five grains from the granary and give them to him saying, 'Take your five grains'." She threw the grains away.

The second one thought, "Yes, it is not good to worry about these five grains for four years. But who knows, these very five grains may have some wonderful, magical, miraculous powers. And after four years he will say, 'All right, eat it!' And when I eat it, I will get this or that supernatural power. I should not throw the grains away. I'd better eat them now. When he comes back, I'll give him another five grains." And she ate the grains up.

The third one was very eager to get the bunch of keys. She kept those five grains in her room where she had the statues of her deities. And every day when she went to inspect the statues, she inspected the five grains also. She took care of the five grains all the four years.

The fourth daughter-in-law took the five grains, cleared the land behind the house and planted them. When the time ripened, five plants grew with a hundred grains each. Next season, all those five hundred grains were planted. And the next season, all the grains were planted. In four years, there were tons of grains.

When the old man came back, each daughter-in-law had her own story. When he questioned the fourth one, she said, "They have increased, sir. The storerooms are full. Bring some laborers to take the grains." The old man was very happy. This daughter had not only preserved the five grains; she had multiplied them.

(Goenka then refers to himself and his students, people who take courses in Vipassana.)

This old man has also given you five grains of Dhamma. Not only preserve but multiply them. And I won't take the bunch of keys away with me; it remains with you. As you keep on multiplying Dhamma, you are able to open the gateway of peace within – and enjoy.

Keep growing in Dhamma, keep growing in Dhamma. Not to oblige anybody else – for your own good, for your own benefit. And also for the good and benefit of so many others, so many others.

