



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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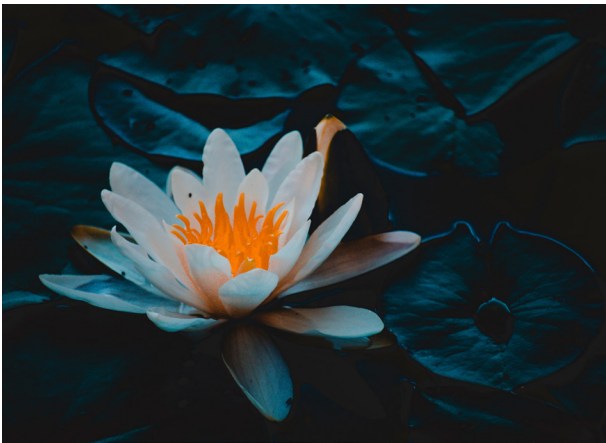
WORDS OF DHAMMA

Na paresm vilomāni, na paresam katākatam.
Attanova avekkheyya, katāni akatāni ca.

Look not to the faults of others, nor to their omissions and commissions.
But rather look to your own acts, to what you have done and left undone.

Dhammapada 4.50

DURING HARD TIMES, MEDITATING HELPS



This article is by a Canadian meditator who, like all of us during the age of Covid-19, has to consider not just how to live a decent life but how to do so during a pandemic. From the website pariyatti.

Two years ago my 73-year old mother suddenly passed away from a heart attack. Five days later my 93-year-old father died as his vital organs failed. Tragedies in my life continued throughout 2019 as I witnessed my extended family members wage war against one another, my father's business collapse, one of my siblings suffer with mental illness, several friends and relatives flee wildfires, young friends diagnosed with cancer, and my children get hurt from sports injuries and bullies. And then COVID-19 arrived.

As governments, businesses, and medical professionals try to figure out how to respond to the current health crisis, one thing becomes increasingly obvious to me as a meditator: uncertainty. Even though I am healthy right now – which could change at any moment – I am still faced with troubling questions. Will I get infected? What do I say to my family amidst the widespread panic? When will this end? Why is this happening to me?

As I grapple with these thoughts and feel the sensations of panic and anxiety arise in my chest and face, I come back to the awareness of my breath and remind myself that these moments, like all moments, are anicca. And the answer to all these me-centered questions becomes clear: it has nothing to do with me! The Buddha taught us that illness, aging, and death are all perfectly normal and inescapable human events. In saying this I am not ignoring these troublesome questions or running away from my problems, but I do know that an imbalanced mind won't help me make wise decisions.

Most people's emotional response to the Coronavirus outbreak is that "this should not be happening." At the surface level of reality, they might be right; but at a deeper level, things have always been this way. The suffering caused by sickness, old age and disease is nothing new. Suffering is an enduring and continual part of being alive – it is unavoidable.

In moments of clarity, when I reflect upon the Buddha's teaching on the universal nature of suffering, my own psychological distress about the pandemic lessens. Believing that things should not be as they are is an unnecessary assumption that causes me additional and unnecessary pain on top of the inevitable suffering that is intrinsic to being human. We can't escape the manifestations of suffering, but by gracefully not reacting to the suffering we can certainly learn to cope. Somebody once asked the courageous Mahatma Gandhi if he ever felt scared. Gandhi replied, "All the time." Fear is a natural and healthy nervous system response to the very real threat of violence, sickness, and death. At the same time, fear can paralyze us, cause us to feel powerless, confused, and desperate. The more time I spend on the cushion, meditating, and reading Dhamma books, the more grounded and secure I feel.

THE SWEETNESS OF COMING OUT OF MISERY

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, December 2014.

This article is based on a talk given by Goenkaji to assistant teachers in 1997. It has been condensed and edited for publication.

Sweetness is important. If there is no sweetness, there is no Dhamma. If there is Dhamma, sweetness is bound to be there. This is the yardstick: Sweetness must come in life. But if Dhamma is weak, how will sweetness come? If there is a drive to compete, to be in control, where is sweetness? If you have discussions and present differing views, and out of attachment you keep on justifying your own position, then you will lose the sweetness.

Suppose by mistake you use harsh words toward someone. Examine how quickly you start generating goodwill toward that person. Suppose you have said something that hurt this person. What do you do then? Do you start generating metta? If so, how quickly? For how long? How deeply? That is how to measure your progress.

Suppose you said something harsh to justify your view, and you know someone feels hurt. But all you think is, "Well, what else could I do? I was entirely correct. That person was wrong or did not understand." All the time your thoughts are full of aversion. Where is Dhamma? Whether this person was wrong or not, you have said something hurtful. Give the balm of metta now. Keep on generating metta. If a mistake has been made, never try to justify it. You realize you made a mistake; accept it and make a decision not to repeat it in future. If you do this, you are progressing and you can help others also. This is pure Dhamma. See that the atmosphere always remains full of Dhamma. If there is an argument, it doesn't matter: see how quickly you can change the atmosphere, fill it with love and compassion.

Out of weakness one keeps on generating impurity, negativity and misery, keeps on rolling in misery. Change the habit pattern of the mind. Here is a wonderful technique that will help you do that.

By practicing Vipassana, one realizes, "Yes, this works. It has purified my mind. It may be just a little, but that does not matter. Whatever impurity has gone away, that much misery has gone away. And look, I am so happy because that much misery has gone, that much suffering has gone. May more and more people come out of their misery."

When you see others come out of their misery, when you see them enjoy peace, happiness and harmony, sympathetic joy arises. Seeing others joyful, you feel more joy. You feel joy because you have eradicated impurities from your mind. And when you see others also coming out of misery, this joy multiplies.

For this purpose, you are serving others. Not to develop ego or achieve a special status or position. You are here simply to serve because you have obtained great benefit from this technique.

May more and more people benefit from this wonderful Dhamma. May more and more people come out of their misery. May more and more people have a smile on their face. And I will smile seeing them smile. That will be good for everyone. This is why I am serving. To make myself happier and others happier. This way of thinking is Dhamma. Keep this in mind, and work. Let us work. Misery is everywhere. We are fortunate that we have this wonderful remedy. Distribute this wonderful remedy, the wonderful Dhamma for your good and for the good of so many miserable people around the world.



CAKE AND COMPASSION IN SERVING A COURSE

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, December 2016.

Serving a Vipassana course can be a valuable experience, giving you many important insights. Following are reminiscences of an assistant teacher living in the northwestern United States.



I first served a course in the kitchen of a Vipassana center in the state of Washington. It was not an easy start. Before, I felt intimidated by my boss at work; now I felt intimidated by the kitchen manager. I went to talk with the teacher, and we chatted a while to put me at ease. Then I was casually asked, “So what’s the problem?”

To my surprise, I blurted out, “I’m afraid my parents may think I’ve joined a cult.” The teacher said, “Are you sure you don’t think that yourself?” And then, after a pause, “You know, you can leave at any time if you need to.” I went for a walk to think it over. I decided to stay.

I returned to the kitchen and was asked to make mashed potatoes. I looked at the potatoes, at the food processor, and at the soft faces of the servers. I felt a familiar

joy. My mother had almost the same machine and had taught me to use it as a child. I started making the mashed potatoes exactly as she had showed me, with vigor. I had never really thought about what she had done by cooking thousands of meals for us. The more I worked at my task, the more gratitude I felt. It was one of many lessons in gratitude to my mother.

A few weeks later, my turn had come to manage the kitchen. One volunteer was the owner of a bakery, and wanted to make a lemon poppy seed cake for the students, but needed to bake a test batch. I said, “Sure, go ahead.” Early the next morning another kitchen worker came up to me with red eyes. “Someone was up until 2:00 a.m., banging pots and pans,” was the complaint. “None of us could sleep.” At 5:30 a.m. our baker showed up to help prepare breakfast. I suggested that after working late more rest might be needed; it was important to avoid burnout.

“That was not part of the deal,” was the reply. “You told me I could do a test of my cake.” “Yes,” I said, “and you made your cake, but now it is time to rest.” I was surprised at how calm and compassionate I felt. The baker sighed heavily but left the kitchen to take a nap.

At the end of the course this same server came up to me and said, “You know something? Everyone always breaks and yells at me – my employees, my colleagues, my family, all of them. But you didn’t break. I will always remember your kindness.” I knew that surely this was the Dhamma working in us both. This was the beauty of a Dhamma kitchen.

Months later, one day I dropped a container of soup. Reddish-orange soup splashed all over the floor. At home, this would have caused a lot of agitation in me. I looked at the soup, got a rag and silently started cleaning up. Another server who was walking by grabbed a rag, knelt down beside me, and also set to work. “Nary a word, eh? I didn’t even hear a gasp,” he said. I smiled, grateful for his quiet help. Yes, I thought – we are just serving, just helping each other.

AN ANCIENT TEACHING TAUGHT IN A MODERN WAY

S.N. Goenka was asked thousands of questions by students during his lifetime. Here is a selection offered in the Vipassana Research Institute newsletter in January 2021.

Q: You keep referring to the Buddha. Are you teaching Buddhism?

Goenkaji: I am not concerned with “isms.” I teach Dhamma, and that is what the Buddha taught. He never taught any “ism,” or any sectarian doctrine. He taught something from which people of every background, every religion, can benefit. He taught the way with which one can live a life full of benefits for oneself and other. He didn't merely give empty sermons saying, “Oh, people: you must live like this, you must live like that.” The Buddha taught practical Dhamma, the actual way to live a wholesome life. And Vipassana is the practical know-how to lead a life of real happiness.

Q: Was it necessary for Buddha to practice meditation even after enlightenment?

Goenkaji: Yes, it was necessary. Even when one becomes a Buddha, it does not mean that the law of nature will be different for this person. The law of nature of this body is that it is decaying, dying. The body requires strength, and when a Buddha goes in this meditative state and comes out, he finds that the whole body has become healthier. It helps; he can serve much more.

Q: Why is your teaching called “in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin”? Did he start a tradition of Buddhism?

Goenkaji: He always referred to the tradition of the Buddha, the tradition that was transferred to Myanmar and was continued down through the three generations of teachers we spoke about: Ledi Sayadaw, his disciple Saya Thetgyi, and finally U Ba Khin. We use the term “in the tradition of U Ba Khin” because he was the last teacher and was very well-known in his country, but this does not mean that this is a technique invented by him. It's an old technique which he was teaching in a modern way.



S.N. Goenka's teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin

Q: Do you think that U Ba Khin taught exactly what the Buddha taught? Did he adapt the Buddha's teachings to modern times? And if so, how and what did he change from the original teachings?

Goenkaji: There was no change in the teaching, but U Ba Khin certainly made the way of presenting the teachings of the Buddha more adapted to the people who came to him. To the non-Buddhist, English-speaking Western people, who were more scientific minded, he would present the teaching in a more scientific way. So the explanation was made more palatable to those who were coming to learn, but the actual practical teaching remained the same.

Q: Can you explain the Buddha's concept that the entire universe is contained within this very body?

Goenkaji: Indeed, within this body turns the wheel of becoming. Within this body is the cause that puts into motion the wheel of becoming. And so within this body is also found the way to attain liberation from the wheel of suffering. For this reason investigation of the body – correct understanding of the direct physical reality within – is of utmost importance for a meditator whose goal is liberation from all conditioning.