

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Sabbapāpassa akaranam, kusalassa upasampadā, sacittapariyodapanam – etam buddhāna sāsanaṃ.
To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind – this is the teaching of the Buddhas.

Dhammapada 14.183

MEDITATING IS THE PATH TO A CLEAR AND HAPPY MIND

Following are a student's questions and S.N. Goenka's answers from a course in California in 1982. This exchange first appeared in the Vipassana International Newsletter in March 2012.

Q: When you say “be happy,” the other side of that to me is be sad.
SNG: Why be sad? Come out of sadness!

Q: Right. But I thought we were working for balance, which is nothing.
SNG: The balance makes you happy. Because you are unbalanced, that's why you are sad. Be balanced. Be happy!

Q: I thought it was “Be balanced, be nothing.”
SNG: No, no, balance makes you happy, not nothing. It won't take you to nothing. It is so positive.

Q: Today I felt happy and I wanted to laugh, but we're supposed to be quiet.
SNG: Yes, yes. Laugh outside. Go outside and laugh.

Q: I was trying not to laugh.
SNG: Laugh outside, nothing wrong. Always be happy. Dhamma is to keep you happy. Why be sad?

Q: One more question: Are we not – am I not – becoming attached to (the idea of) enlightenment?
SNG: No. If you become attached to enlightenment, you are running in the opposite direction from enlightenment. Result or no result, you are doing your job and leave the result to Dhamma; then no attachment.

Q: So I get up at 4 o'clock every morning because I'm doing my work.
SNG: Yes, this is your duty. You do your work, but without attachment.

Q: In order to perform right action, isn't that kind of an attachment?
SNG: No. You will never become sad with a balanced mind, with any result that comes, because the results are not in your hands. Nature does that. You have done your job and left the result to nature, to Dhamma.

Q: So it's being willing just to make a mistake and...
SNG: If you make a mistake, you understand, “Well, I made a mistake.” Next time you try not to make a mistake, to do it in a proper way and yet you are not successful; again, smile. Again work in a different way, again smile. With every failure, if you are happy, if you are smiling, then you are not attached. But if failure makes you sad and a success makes you highly elated, then certainly you are attached.

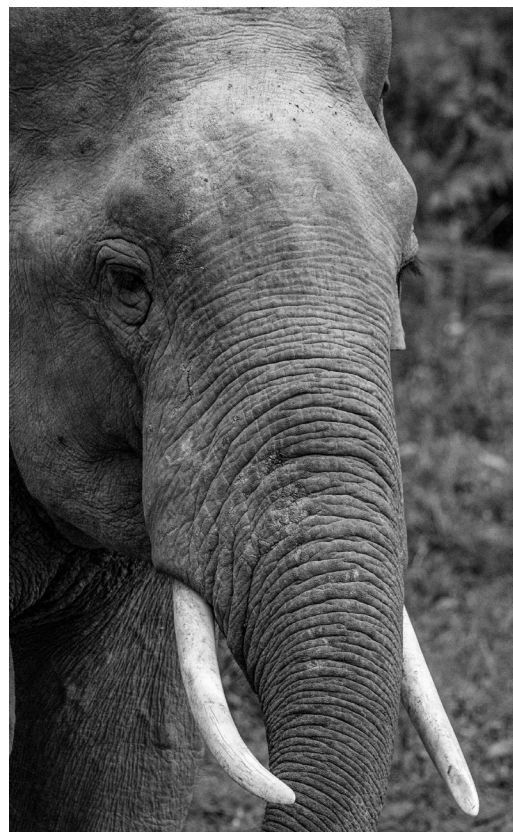
Q: All right. So the right action is just the action you take, it's not...
SNG: Just the action, not the result. The result will automatically be good, Dhamma does that. We don't have the power to choose the result, the result is not in our control. Our control is to do our duty. That's all: you have done your duty.



IT IS POSSIBLE TO ENJOY PEACE AND HARMONY

The following summary is based on a discourse given by Goenkaji during a course in California, USA, in 1991. This is the discourse played on Day 2 of a 10-day course.

The second day is over. Although it was slightly better than the first day, there are still difficulties. The mind is restless, agitated, wild. It is like a monkey grasping one branch or object after another. It is like a wild bull or elephant that creates havoc when it enters a human dwelling-place. Its strength is a great danger.



If a wise person tames and trains a wild animal, its strength begins to serve society in constructive ways. Similarly the mind, which is far more powerful and dangerous than a wild elephant, must be tamed and trained; then its enormous strength will start to serve you.

But you must work very patiently, persistently and continuously. You have to do the work; no one else can do it for you.

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.

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.

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 samadhi. And purifying the mind involves developing panna, wisdom or insight through direct experience of the truth. These are the three 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 tranquillity yourself, you need to foster a peaceful, tranquil atmosphere.

Still more deeply, you cannot perform a physical or vocal action to harm others without first generating negativity in the mind – anger, hatred, greed, passion or something else. First an impurity arises in the mind, and you yourself start suffering now, and 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.

This is the beginning of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha. It is noble in the sense that anyone who walks on the path is bound to become a noble-hearted, saintly person. The first step of the path is sila, which has three parts:

1) Right speech. Speaking lies, speaking harsh words that hurt others, backbiting and slanderous talk, babbling and purposeless chatter are all unwholesome vocal action. If you abstain from these, what remains is right speech.

2) Right action. Any action that hurts or harms others is unwholesome – whether killing, stealing, sexual misconduct or using intoxicants. If you abstain from these, what remains is wholesome physical action.

3) Right livelihood. If the means of supporting oneself is harmful to others, it is not a right livelihood. For example, selling weapons, poison, living animals or animal flesh cannot be right livelihood. If the motivation is to contribute as a member of society, to serve the community in return for a just remuneration, such a person is practicing right livelihood.

If Dhamma consisted merely of exhortations to abstain from actions that harm others, it would have no effect. People know the dangers of unwholesome actions but continue to behave in the same harmful way... because they have no control over the mind. Hence the second step of Dhamma, samadhi – developing mastery over the mind. Within this division are another three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path:

4) Right effort. By your practice you have seen how weak and infirm the mind is, always jumping from one object to another. Such a mind requires exercise to strengthen it.

There are four exercises to strengthen the mind: removing from it unwholesome qualities; preventing unwholesome qualities from entering; preserving and multiplying the wholesome qualities present in the mind; and welcoming wholesome qualities that are missing. Indirectly, by the practice of awareness of respiration, you have started performing these exercises.

5) Right awareness – that is, awareness of the reality of your physical and mental structure in the present moment. Of the past there can be only memories; for the future there can be only imaginings.



You have started training yourself to remain aware of whatever reality manifests at this moment, within the limited area of the nostrils. Your job is simply to be aware of it. Wherever there is life, there is bound to be sensation at the physical level.

You focus on what happens here within the area of the nostrils. Don't react to the sensation; just observe. You cannot choose what sensation to feel; it is a choiceless observation. Just remain aware of the sensation till it passes away, and then focus on whatever new sensation takes its place. And if there is no sensation, continue observing the respiration. You will notice sensations elsewhere in the body but for now ignore them. By continuing to focus on a small area, you make your mind sharper.

6) Right concentration. Mere concentration is not the aim of this technique; the concentration you develop must have a wholesome base. With a base of craving, aversion or illusion you may concentrate the mind, but this is not samadhi. You must be aware of the present reality within yourself, without any craving or aversion.

You have been practicing sila. By developing mastery of the mind, you have started practicing samadhi. Next is the practice of panna (insight, wisdom), which takes you to the depths of the mind where the impurities at the root of your unhappiness lie and where they must be eradicated.

May you use this technique to enjoy real happiness, the happiness of liberation. May all beings be happy!

HAVING STOPPED, HOW DO YOU START TO MEDITATE AGAIN?

Assistant teachers answer students' questions at Vipassana courses everywhere in the world. Here are some questions and answers which appeared in the June/July 2019 issue of the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter.

Dear Assistant Teacher: I have, to my disappointment, stopped meditating for quite a while. Do you have any tips for getting back into it? What useful things can I remind myself as I contend with the difficulties of sitting for an hour and not being able to meditate as “well” as I have in the past?

Dear Old Student: Here is a tip for getting back into meditation: start again! Make a determination to meditate for an hour, and any time in that hour you realize that you are not meditating correctly, just start again. Try to not judge yourself, just accept that this is the situation at present, and try to keep developing equanimity with the fact that it is difficult.

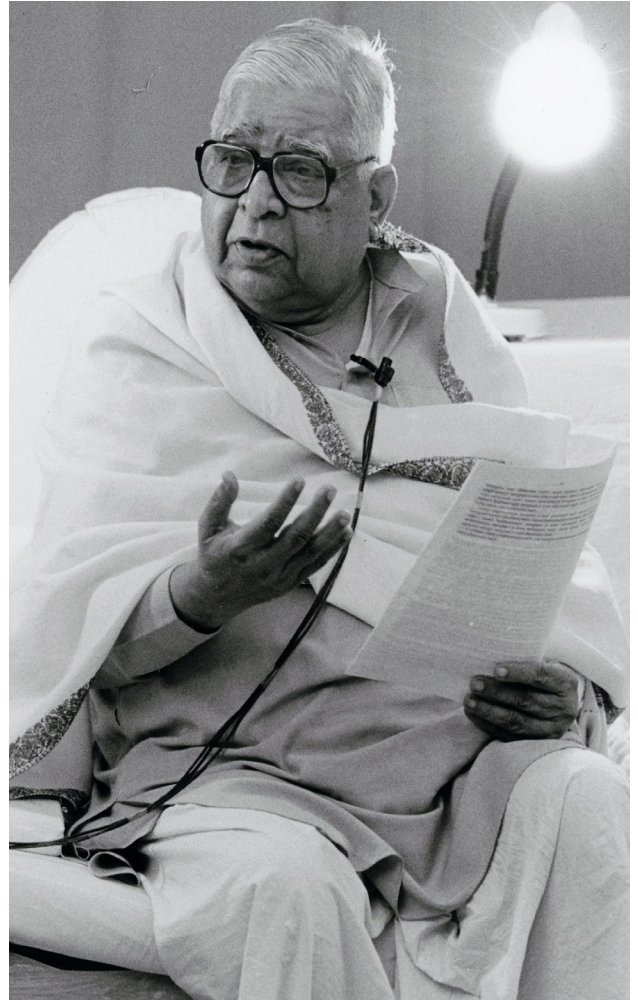
It may be that some deep old habit pattern has arisen which makes it hard to sit. Good! Let it come up on the surface. You may have to work with anapana for some time, or work with larger chunks of the body, or even the extremities. You can work in different ways, according to each different situation. Remember that Goenkaji often says “do not generate a feeling of depression or disappointment” if you realize that you have temporarily stopped. Just start again, with enthusiasm and strong determination to keep practicing.

It is common for the obstacles to meditation to temporarily overwhelm us (the five hindrances are craving, aversion, drowsiness, agitation, and doubt). So use all of your experience and the five friends (faith, effort, awareness, concentration, and wisdom) to help you.

Dear Assistant Teacher: As I'm practicing, I'm feeling more sensitive to my sensations, which I expect. But I feel like I'm also more sensitive to negative sensations and am more aware of them than I was before. It's also harder to ignore them because I know they're there. When I'm sitting, this isn't a problem because I can just observe them. But when I'm in daily life, how would you recommend I observe sensations objectively while still acting normal/being present/etc.? If I just focus on whatever I'm doing, I'm worried that I'm avoiding or suppressing the negative sensation. But if I focus on the negative sensation I become distracted and aloof, or I react to it and create unhappiness for both myself and those around me.

Dear Old Student: Yes, as we become more sensitive we start to experience unpleasant feelings that were present all along, but which we previously ignored or suppressed. Now, with Vipassana, we're training our mind to be aware. But at the same time we need to develop equanimity. This is the more difficult part of the process, as you are discovering. It is also the most important part of the practice.

The key is understanding the changing nature of everything you feel. Certainly it's unpleasant, yet it is also changing continuously. With this understanding of change, equanimity increases and you will be less affected by the negativity. Be patient! There is no need to always focus on sensations. Goenka says, “work while you're working.” He means: give all attention to the matter at hand: work, or play, or your relationships with others. There is no need to fear anything: you are not regressing. Eventually all the negativity comes to the surface and gets cleaned out, but it happens in a gradual way.



Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka