



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XXXII • DECEMBER 2021

WORDS OF DHAMMA

Suddasam sunipunam, yatthakāmanipātinam; cittam rakkhetha medhāvī, cittam guttam sukhāvaham.

Difficult to detect and very subtle, the mind seizes whatever it wants;
so let a wise one guard one's mind, for a guarded mind brings happiness.

Dhammapada 3.36

SENSATIONS ARISE, THEN CHANGE. AND CHANGE. AND...

All assistant teachers answer questions posed by students. Here are excerpts of a Q&A from the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter. It appeared in April 2021.

Dear Assistant Teacher: I've been practicing Vipassana for almost 3 years now and I take it very seriously. It's helped me a lot. That being said, I'm considering going to a therapist and writing in a journal to see if those tools can help as well. An Assistant Teacher told me that Vipassana doesn't conflict with seeing a therapist and writing in a journal in regular life, but I also know that those activities are prohibited during courses in order to put all focus into the technique. How should I approach seeing a therapist and writing in a journal, which are forms of expressing emotions, while maintaining and growing in Vipassana, which aims to strengthen the capacity to observe?

Dear Student: The reason for not permitting journaling during a course is so the mind remains fully introverted and focused on the technique itself (observing the reality "as it is"). But outside a course there is no conflict, no need for concern. You can see a therapist and journal as you wish, and still maintain your practice of Vipassana.



Nor is there any conflict between "expressing emotions" and "developing the capacity to observe". Even while you are working with the therapist or journaling, you can remain aware of sensations (in any part of the body), appreciating their changing nature and maintaining equanimity. This is the essence of the practice.

Dear Assistant Teacher: I recently completed my first 10-day course, am keeping up a daily practice, and have just started participating in the virtual group sittings. My question has to do with my previous meditation practice, which includes both sitting and walking meditation. Is it okay for me to practice this Vipassana technique with a group that practices a different technique?

Dear Student: The purpose of joining together with other meditators in a group sitting is to support one another. Therefore, Mr. Goenka recommends that we practice with people who are doing the same kind of meditation, i.e. Vipassana as he teaches.

As you know from your recent course, there is no "walking" meditation in this tradition. One may practice Vipassana in any posture (sitting, standing, lying down, walking), but in all postures the attention is on the sensations felt in the body and their changing nature (anicca), not on the gross movement of the body.

GRADUALLY THE VOLCANO HAS BECOME QUIET

A citizen of India, N.H. Parikh was one of the first people appointed an assistant teacher of Vipassana, in 1981. Two years later he talked about growing in dhamma; this excerpt was reprinted in the March 2012 Vipassana International Newsletter. Long admired for his wisdom and calm, Parikh died in 2005.

At the age of 42, while living the life of a good householder, there arose in me a tremendous urge to pursue the path of purification of mind. This was stirred up as a result of a saintly person saying to me, “There can be no progress in the spiritual life without purification of the mind.”



Upon hearing these words, I immediately began to search for a method by which the mind could be purified. Two friends of mine told me about Vipassana meditation as taught by Goenkaji, but at that time I was not inclined to go and try. But when another friend attended the course and within a month expressed his desire to take a second course, I thought there must be something worthwhile in it. This was primarily because this man was a businessman to whom time and money were important, yet he was prepared to sacrifice both for the sake of Vipassana.

I attended my first course in 1972 at Nashik, India, and immediately stayed on for the following short course. In this first course, even though one gets only a glimpse of the technique, I felt that such an experience was just what I had been searching for. For the first time in my life I was a real meditator: really introverted, observing myself.

Despite this positive feeling, I did not want to blindly accept this technique without experimenting and putting it to the test. So I decided to practice for three months at home and then practice intensively for another three months doing courses with Goenkaji in different camps throughout India. At the end of this period I was firmly convinced that here was a wonderful technique for purification of the mind, purification which can eradicate defilements from the deepest level of the mind. Now Vipassana has become a part of my life – not a mere rite or ritual, but a way of life.

While the experiences that can arise in meditation are not to be compared nor given any valuation, nevertheless relating them sometimes helps to inspire confidence in others who are struggling on the same path. But if certain of these experiences are taken as something which one must attain, then they create obstacles. A few instances will illustrate this point.

One meditator who had taken 20 or 25 courses read somewhere that when you concentrate on a small area below the nostrils and above the upper lip, you see a light and experience warmth. She had not experienced this, so she came to me with a long, sad face. She was worried because she was not having a particular experience.

This is not Vipassana. Even after many courses this student was giving importance to certain experiences over others, with no equanimity. From my own experience, I had initially come to understand how the sensations arise, seem to stay for some time, and then pass away. After some practice the sensations which “seem to stay for some time” begin to get disintegrated, and we reach the stage where only the arising and passing away of sensations is experienced. When a severe pain is present somewhere in the body, we expect it to pass away quickly and naturally. After all, we

are repeatedly told it is anicca, anicca (impermanent). But still the pain persists. One hour, two hours, two days, 10 days and it still persists, so we get upset because it is not going. In my own case pain remained for about two years.

In my upper back there was a solid plate (of pain) about eight inches by six inches and three quarters of an inch thick. It was so solid that tremendous pain began as soon as I sat for meditation. It wasn't there when I was not meditating. I patiently observed it with never a thought that it should go away. But it persisted for two years, and sometimes it became so hot it seemed as if you could (cook) on it. This solidity started melting and became liquid and began to move about within the same area, like water moving in a hot water bag. This lasted for four to five months; then it started to disintegrate in the form of sparks, as if a live volcano was erupting. It was really hellfire, not for a few days but for months together.

Gradually the volcano has become quiet, but that area has become so sensitive that when anything happens outside or inside, there will immediately be a reaction on that part of the body. It is like a signal, a warning signal for me to be aware. No one should expect a similar experience, but the point to be noted is that sensations which are intense, solidified and gross do seem to “stay for some time”; but this “staying for some time” does not necessarily mean minutes, hours or days, but maybe years or even the whole lifetime. So very patiently, quietly we just observe, observe.

Another experience which may be of help to meditators is that in my 10th or 11th course I could not feel sensations below the nostrils and above the upper lip, nor anywhere else on the body for seven or eight days. I was equanimous with the situation and continued to do Anapana. No complaint, no advice sought. Just observed what it was. Once it happened that after about seven or eight years of meditation, having taken a number of courses and assisting Goenkaji with the teaching work, there arose in me during one course a tremendous aversion to the discipline, rules and regulations. It began the first day at the first sitting and was so strong that it was not possible for me to do even a moment of Anapana. This continued for two full days. I had been telling students to return to Anapana when any difficulty arises. Now here I was in the same predicament. Normally I find solutions to problems which arise by myself. So what to do?

Despite being unable to do Anapana, there was no worry or tension. Sitting quietly doing nothing, after a few hours on the third day, I noticed that the resistance had cleared and I began working effortlessly and with enthusiasm for the remainder of the course. All these experiences have been very helpful for me in learning how to deal with different situations equanimously. May they serve the reader likewise on the path of Dhamma.



EVERY COURSE IS DIFFERENT; ALL ARE INSPIRING

Hundreds of assistant teachers conduct Vipassana courses around the world. They come from all backgrounds, ethnic groups and religions. Normally assistant teachers try not to be the focus of attention. They understand that they are simply representatives of the chain of teachers; and, in any case, students should concentrate on their own experience. But sometimes ATs have stories that can inspire and encourage others. Here are two, from the October 2012 Vipassana International Newsletter, that assistant teachers have agreed to share with us.

It was Day 8 of a course near the city of Monterrey, in northern Mexico. This is the country's third-largest city and its commercial and industrial center. Like some American cities, Monterrey has faced gang violence.

At this course one of the conducting teachers was American and the other was Mexican. More than 60 students were sitting. The evening discourse had come to an end. Students had taken a break and then returned to listen to instructions. Now they were meditating seriously. Soon it would be time for them to go to their rooms for the night.

Suddenly the silence was shattered by the sound of gunfire. It seemed as though a battle was being waged right outside the meditation hall, though it was probably several blocks away from us. Evidently the local drug gangs were having a shootout in the streets.

We turned off all the lights in the hall and told students to lie down on the floor. Normally lying down is not permitted in the meditation hall, but it might be the best posture in certain circumstances! By 9 p.m. the battle had ended, the shooting had stopped, and the gangs had gone home. In the quiet, Goenkaji chanted Bhavatu sabba mangalam – “May all beings be happy.” As usual, questions and answers followed and then everyone went quietly to bed.

It had been a tense situation, but the students took it all in stride. For them, what mattered was that they had found a way to come out of strife and achieve real peace. *(This story was told by Arthur Nichols from the USA, who has served for many years in Latin America, and Adriana Patino, an assistant teacher from Monterrey, Mexico.)*



The sheer happiness of being allowed to do such a wonderful thing as conduct courses, to do something really worthwhile, to do something you really can stand behind... and to really develop the quality of selfless service! This is a joy. Of course, to serve as a parent, a teacher, a doctor, a cleaner, a nurse, a builder is also a great thing. But there is always something else mixed in with it... By conducting courses, we help others to get and develop this wonderful technique.

Starting from Goenkaji till today in India and worldwide, there have always been some teachers who conducted up to 22 courses a year. The first course I sat, in 1974, finished at lunchtime and in the evening the next one started; there were about 150 students in each course.

I remember a very senior Indian teacher arrived at the meditation center from a course in Ladakh (in northern India) in the afternoon. As he walked into the office, he was told, “Here is your ticket for tomorrow’s train to Chennai (in the south of the country).” He was 78! He did not look stressed. *(The speaker, Floh Lehmann, lived in India in the 1970s. She moved on to conduct courses mainly in Europe.)*