

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Manopakopam rakkheyya; manasā samvuto siyā. Manoduccaritam hitvā, manasā sucaritam care.

Let one guard oneself against irritability in thought; let one be controlled in mind. Abandoning mental misconduct, let one practice good conduct in thought.

Dhammapada 17.233

EMBRACE HAPPINESS AND LEAVE MISERY BEHIND

On the occasion of the Millennium World Peace Summit, on Aug. 29, 2000, S.N. Goenka spoke to the United Nations General Assembly. These excerpted remarks first appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in September 2002.

Much has been said here about conversion, both for and against. Far from being opposed to conversion, I am very much in favor of it – but not conversion from one organized religion to another. No, the conversion must be from misery to happiness.

It must be from bondage to liberation. It must be from cruelty to compassion. That is the conversion needed today, and that is what this meeting should seek to bring about. The ancient land of India gave a message of peace and harmony to the world, to all humanity, but it did more: it gave a method, a technique, for achieving peace and harmony. To me it seems that if we

want peace in human society, we cannot ignore individuals. If there is no peace in the mind of the individual, I do not understand how there can be real peace in the world. If I have an agitated mind, always full of anger, hatred, ill will and animosity, how can I give peace to the world? I cannot, because I have no peace myself.

Enlightened persons have therefore said, “First find peace within yourself.” One has to examine whether there is really peace within oneself. All the sages, saints and seers of the world have advised, “Know thyself.” This means not merely knowing at the intellectual level, or accepting at the emotional or devotional level, but realizing by experience at the actual level. When you experience the truth about yourself, within yourself, at the experiential level, the problems of life find their own solutions. You start understanding the universal law, the law of nature – or, if you prefer, the law of God Almighty. This law is applicable to one and all: When I generate anger, hatred, ill will or animosity, I am the first victim of my anger. First I harm myself, and only afterwards do I start harming others. This is the law of nature.

If I observe within myself, I find that as soon as any negativity arises in the mind, there is a physical reaction: my body becomes hot and starts burning; there are palpitations and tension; I am miserable. And when I become miserable, I do not keep this misery limited to myself; instead I throw it onto others. Although I talk of peace and happiness, more important than words is what is happening within me. And if my mind is free of negativity, again the same law starts working. The moment there is no negativity in the mind, nature – or God Almighty – starts rewarding me: I feel peaceful. This too I can observe within myself.

Whatever one’s religion or tradition or country, when one breaks the law of nature and generates negativity in the mind, one is bound to suffer. Nature itself provides the punishment. Those who break nature’s laws start feeling the misery of hellfire within, here and now. The conversion that is needed is from impurity of mind to purity of mind, and this conversion changes people in wonderful ways. One examines how the mind influences the material body, and how the body influences the mind. This technique of self-observation can be practiced by one and all.



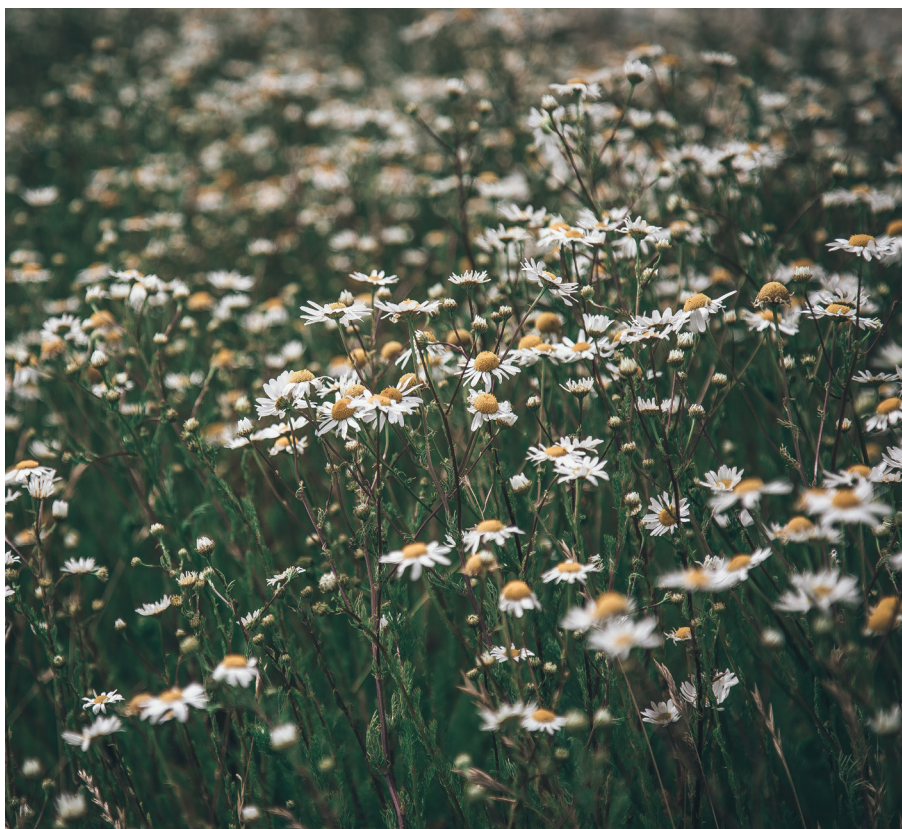
DON'T JUST THINK ABOUT MEDITATION. DO IT.

The following is a lightly edited translation of a discourse given by renowned Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka to some 5,000 students in Nagpur, India, on October 8, 2000. It appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in July 2004.

My dear Dhamma sons and Dhamma daughters: I am very happy that we have sat together and practiced pure Dhamma. Meditating together is of great importance. Two thousand six hundred years ago, Gotama the Buddha arose in this country and taught pure Dhamma, bringing great happiness to the world. People started living in accordance with the teaching. They started meditating together just as we have done today. There is no greater happiness than this.

When Dhamma brothers and sisters sit and meditate together, our practice is strengthened because the meditation of others is strong and the entire atmosphere is charged with Dhamma. Whenever possible, meditators should have joint sittings at least once a week. Every meditator has to develop the strength to face the ups and downs of life. To do this, it is very beneficial to meditate one hour in the morning and evening daily, to meditate together once a week, and (if possible) to take a ten-day course at least once a year. Then you will keep progressing on the path. All of us face many difficulties and obstacles. But we must not give up!

To keep the body healthy and strong, we do physical exercises, such as yoga, jogging or walking; otherwise, our bodies will become weak and diseased. It is even more necessary to keep our minds healthy and strong; we should not allow them to become weak or diseased. We live in a complex and stressful world. When our minds are not strong, we lose our balance and become miserable. Sometimes meditators come to me and say: "I have stopped meditating. What can I do? I am too busy!" Yet we give food to the body three or four times a day, do we not? We don't say, "I am such a busy person, I don't have time for food today." The meditation that we do every morning and evening makes the mind strong. When we forget this, we harm ourselves...



Those who have not learned this meditation are unfortunate. But those who have received this benevolent teaching and are not using it are even more unfortunate. It is a great good fortune to be born as a human being. Only a human being can eradicate mental defilements from the depth of the mind. This work cannot be done by animals, birds, reptiles, insects, or other lower beings. Even a human being cannot do this work if he or she does not practice this technique.

Suppose someone is born as a human, finds this wonderful technique, learns to use it, benefits from it and still discontinues the practice – what a misfortune! Suppose a bankrupt person finds a treasure, then discards it and becomes bankrupt again; a starving person receives delicious food, discards it and becomes hungry again; a sick person finds medicine, discards it and becomes sick again – very unfortunate, indeed! We should never make this mistake.



You have attained a human birth. You have come in contact with this wonderful Dhamma. You have developed faith in this technique because you have benefited from it. And yet you have stopped meditating. Do not be heedless. You are not doing your teacher a favor by meditating twice a day; you are doing yourself a favor. When someone starts feeling sensations on the body, understand that the door of liberation has opened. A person who cannot feel sensations on the body is unfortunate; the door of liberation has not opened for them. When one learns to remain equanimous towards the sensations, not only has the door opened but one has entered and started walking on the path of liberation.

Death can come at any time. We do not have an agreement with death that it should come only when we are ready. With Dhamma, we are ready whenever it comes. Vipassana is a priceless gem that can liberate us from the cycle of birth and death. It... ultimately leads to full liberation from all suffering. Some may say, "But we do not have time, we have so much work." These are poor excuses for squandering an invaluable jewel. When there is sorrow, despair or dullness in daily life for whatever reason, this technique will help.

Mind and body are interrelated. When a defilement arises in the mind, some sensation will arise in the body. This is the law of nature. A meditator understands that there is a defilement in the mind and observes sensation in the body. One practices this thoroughly, not just once or twice but again and again. Every sensation is impermanent; the defilement connected to it is also impermanent. When we observe sensations, the defilements become weak and drain away.

Such a great benefit! No matter what defilement arises, whether lust, egotism, envy, fear, or anything else, we will not be overpowered. We have learned the art of living. Negativities will keep occurring throughout our lives, for this reason or that. We have a very effective weapon in the sensations. No enemy will be able to overpower us; we are the masters. Vipassana is the technique to make us our own masters. You have come on the path of Vipassana. Understand that you have received an invaluable jewel. Now you must meditate regularly to be happy and peaceful for the whole life. May all beings be happy, be peaceful, be liberated.



THE MIND CAN GROW SENSITIVE – AND STRONGER

Teachers answer questions at every Vipassana course all around the world. Here are some questions and answers that first appeared in the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter in December 2018.

Dear Assistant Teacher:

I have a question from my first 10-day course. My question has to do with silently saying words while sweeping/surveying myself. I find I am unable to effectively focus with a sharp and concentrated mind without “saying” words in my mind such as foot, heel, ankle, calf, stomach, chest, ears, etc. Please advise.



Dear Student:

Any kind of mental vocalization or verbalization is ultimately a hindrance in this technique. Why? Because this is a “feeling” technique. We need to develop the ability to feel sensations at the physical level. Many students have strong mental visualization skills, and tend to visualize parts of the body. In your case, you're using mental verbalizing (“ear” rather than “eye”) to help. But these actually aren't a help, no more than straining your ears can help you to see something. Eyes and ears are completely separate senses. Likewise, the feeling sense-door is completely separate. The eyes and ears, or the mental imagination of eyes and ears, cannot help develop feeling. If someone touched you on the shoulder, you'd know it: no need to visualize the shoulder; no need to say “shoulder.” We need to train the mind to feel each part of the body, and to feel the prevailing sensations in each part, without any external stimulus. So, gently close the eyes, and intend to feel each part of the body. When you notice yourself going back to the habit of sub-vocalizing, just gently stop. Remind yourself this is a feeling exercise. Keep trying! You'll succeed.

Dear Assistant Teacher:

Sometimes when I'm unable to focus or not in the most joyful mood, I drink a mild cup of green tea, black tea or coffee, and it completely flips my mood. I'm filled with creative ideas streaming into my mind, I become super-optimistic about life, I'm super-productive, and I feel no hesitation or fear about anything. These drinks never used to have that effect on me before, but in the past six years or so as my practice has been deepening, these drinks have started to have this effect on me more and more. What could be going on? Is this a common experience?

Dear Student:

As you keep practicing, you will find that you are more clearly aware of your different mental states, as well as more clearly aware how these are affected by any stimuli, whether interior or exterior. You become much more sensitive to any influences. With your continued strong practice you will also develop more equanimity with any situation that arises. Whether these substances are healthy for you or not, is up to you to decide. As meditators, our formal meditation practice helps us know ourselves and take proper action.

Dear Assistant Teacher:

Is it required that we should be aware of the breath while moving from head to toe or should awareness of the breath be in the beginning for a few minutes (for anapana) and then we should only observe bodily sensations?

Dear Student:

The purpose of having awareness of the natural breath is to develop your concentration, so that when you do observe sensations you can maintain your focus. If you find at the beginning of your sitting that you do not have sufficient concentration, spend 5-10 minutes on awareness of your breath. The main focus of our practice should be working with the sensations and using them as a tool to develop equanimity with the understanding of anicca (change).