



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Anatthajanano doso, doso cittappakopano; bhayamantarato jātam tam jano nāvabujjhati.

Hate brings great misfortune, hate churns up and harms the mind;
this fearful danger deep within, most people do not understand.

Itivuttaka 3.88

LET GOODWILL FLOW FROM DEEP INSIDE

This excerpt from the book “The Art of Living”, by William Hart, first appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in December 2001.

The absence of craving or aversion does not imply an attitude of callous indifference, in which one enjoys one’s own liberation but gives no thought to the suffering of others. On the contrary, real equanimity is properly called “holy indifference.” It is a dynamic quality, an expression of purity of mind. When freed of the habit of blind reaction, the mind for the first time can take positive action. This is creative, productive, and beneficial for oneself and for all others.

Previously one tried to keep whatever was good for oneself and pass anything unwanted on to others. Now one understands that one’s own happiness cannot be achieved at the expense of others, that giving happiness to others brings happiness to oneself. Therefore, one seeks to share whatever good one has with others.

This is the logical conclusion of Vipassana meditation: metta bhavana, the development of goodwill toward others. Previously one may have paid lip service to such sentiments, but deep within the mind the old process of craving and aversion continued. Now, to some extent the process of reaction has stopped, the old habit of egoism is gone, and goodwill naturally flows from the depths of the mind. With the entire force of a pure mind behind it, this goodwill can be very powerful in creating a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere for the benefit of all.

There are those who imagine that always remaining balanced means that one can no longer enjoy life in all its variety, as if a painter had a palette full of colours and chose to use nothing but gray, or as if one had a piano and chose to play nothing but one note, a middle C. This is a wrong understanding of equanimity. The fact is that the piano is out of tune and we do not know how to play it. Simply pounding the keys in the name of self-expression will only create discord. But if we learn how to tune the instrument and to play it properly, then we can make music. From the lowest to the highest note we use the full range of the keyboard, and every note that we play creates nothing but harmony, beauty.

Student: What is true compassion?

Goenkaji: It is the wish to serve people, to help them out of suffering. But it must be without attachment. If you start crying over the suffering of others, you only make yourself unhappy. This is not the path of Dhamma. If you have true compassion, then with all possible love you try to help others, to the best of your ability. If you fail, you smile and try another way to help. You serve without worrying about the results of your service. This is real compassion, proceeding from a balanced mind.



CREATE A POSITIVE ATMOSPHERE FOR ALL

This article was presented to the Seminar on Vipassana Meditation held in Igatpuri, India, in December 1986. It appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in December 1991.

The practice of metta bhavana (meditation of loving kindness) is an important adjunct to the technique of Vipassana meditation – indeed, its logical outcome. It is a technique whereby we radiate loving kindness and goodwill toward all beings, deliberately charging the atmosphere around us with the calming, positive vibrations of pure and compassionate love. The Buddha instructed people to develop metta so as to lead more peaceful and harmonious lives – and to help others do so as well. Students of Vipassana should follow that instruction because metta gives us a way to share with all others the peace and harmony we are developing.

The technique of metta bhavana is introduced only at the end of a Vipassana course. At such a time meditators often feel a deep wish for the well-being of others, making their practice of metta truly effective. Though limited time is devoted to it in a course, metta may be regarded as the culmination of the practice of Vipassana. Metta is not prayer; nor is it the hope that an outside agency will help. On the contrary, it is a dynamic process producing a supportive atmosphere where others can act to help themselves. Metta can be omni-directional or directed toward a particular person. In either case, meditators are simply providing an outlet, because the metta we feel is not “our” metta. By eliminating egotism we open our minds and make them conduits for the forces of positivity throughout the universe. The realization that metta is not produced by us makes its transmission truly selfless.

In order to conduct metta, the mind must be calm, balanced and free from negativity. This is the type of mind developed in the practice of Vipassana. A meditator knows by experience how anger, antipathy, or ill will destroy peace and frustrate any efforts to help others. Only as hatred is removed and equanimity is developed can we be happy and wish happiness for others. We must therefore examine ourselves before practicing metta bhavana to check whether we are really capable of transmitting metta. If we find even a tinge of hatred or aversion in our minds, we should refrain at that time. However, if mind and body are filled with serenity and well-being, it is natural and appropriate to share this happiness with others.

This loving attitude enables us to deal far more skillfully with the vicissitudes of life. Suppose, for example, one encounters a person who is acting out of deliberate ill will to harm others. The common response – to react with fear and hatred – is self-centered, does nothing to improve the situation and, in fact, magnifies the negativity. It would be far more helpful to remain calm and balanced, with a feeling of goodwill even for the person who is acting wrongly. The serenity gained in Vipassana meditation naturally gives rise to feelings of metta, and throughout the day this will continue to affect us and our environment in a positive way. Thus Vipassana ultimately has a dual function: to bring us happiness by purifying our minds, and to help us foster the happiness of others by preparing us to practice metta.





CONNECT WITH PEOPLE WHO SHARE YOUR BEST QUALITIES

This article first appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in December 1991.

Q: Are there forces that support us as we develop our paramis (wholesome qualities)?

A: Certainly – visible forces as well as invisible ones. For example, people tend to associate with those of similar interest, background or character. When we develop good qualities in us, we naturally attract people who have those qualities. When we come in contact with such good people, naturally we get support from them. If we generate love, compassion and goodwill, we will get tuned up with all beings that have these positive vibrations, and we will start getting support from them. It is like tuning a radio to receive waves from a distant broadcasting station. Similarly, we tune ourselves to vibrations of the type we generate, and so we receive the benefit of those vibrations. You have to work hard, with the understanding that your work will enable you to benefit from the good vibrations of others.

Q: Is the generation of metta a natural consequence of the purity of mind, or is it something that must be actively developed? Are there progressive stages in metta?

A: Both are true. According to the law of nature – the law of Dhamma – as the mind is purified, the quality of metta develops naturally. On the other hand, you must work to develop it by practicing metta bhavana.

In such countries as Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, metta bhavana is very common. However, the practice usually is confined to mentally reciting “May all beings be happy, be peaceful.” This certainly gives some peace of mind to the person who is practicing it. To some extent good vibrations enter the atmosphere, but they are not strong. However, when you practice Vipassana, purification starts. With this base of purity, your practice of metta naturally becomes stronger. Then you won’t need to repeat these good wishes aloud. A stage will come when every fiber of the body keeps on feeling good for others, generating goodwill for others.

Q: How does metta help in the development of sympathetic joy and compassion?

A: Sympathetic joy and compassion naturally follow as one develops metta. Metta is love for all beings. Metta takes away the traces of aversion, animosity and hatred toward others. What is sympathetic joy? When you see other

people progressing, becoming happier, if your mind is not pure, you will generate jealousy toward this person. “Why did they get this, and not I? I’m a more deserving person. Why are they given such a position of power, or status? Why not I?” This kind of jealousy is the manifestation of an impure mind.

Similarly, when you find somebody suffering, compassion automatically arises if your mind is pure. If you are an ego-centered person, full of impurities, without the proper practice of Vipassana, without metta, then seeing someone in trouble doesn’t affect you. You don’t care; you are indifferent. If the mind becomes pure and metta develops, hardness of heart cannot stay; it starts melting. You see people suffering and your heart goes out to them. You don’t start crying; that’s another extreme. Rather, you feel like helping such people. If it is within your means, you give some tangible help. Otherwise, at least you help with your vibrations: “May you be happy. May you come out of your misery.” Even if you have no material means to help somebody, you always have this spiritual means.

WISE ADVICE: COMPLETE THE COURSE

Hundreds of assistant teachers conduct Vipassana courses around the world. They come from all backgrounds, ethnic groups, and religions. Normally, they are not 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. Like this one, for example. It first appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in October 2012.

My first Vipassana course was in Mumbai, India, in November 1972. It was in the middle of the city, in a neighborhood filled with hustle and bustle, noisy day and night. But the managers were very kind and helpful. We slept eight to 10 to a room. The people were from different backgrounds, and most became involved in philosophical discussions during the break periods. I myself kept silent and continued working.

On Day 5 of the course, I felt very subtle sensations throughout the body. I thought that I had fully understood the technique and had achieved everything I wanted. Then an idea overpowered me. Without wasting any more time, I thought I should leave the course, renounce worldly life, go to a secluded place and practice Vipassana continuously to achieve full liberation. I decided to leave behind all my belongings – clothes, wristwatch, money, even footwear. And without asking the Teacher for permission, without informing anybody, I left the course site. After walking about seven miles barefoot, I found a tree in a quiet spot. There I sat, meditating. Then a thought arose in my mind: I should visit my sister’s house, which was close by, and tell her about my wish to renounce worldly life.

I went to her house and knocked on the door. She was very surprised to see me standing there. But she quietly made me comfortable and heard my story patiently. Then in soothing words she said to me, “You may do what you want, but listen to my advice. First go back to the course and complete it. Then meet your family and tell them about your aspirations.” By this time I felt calmer. I accepted her advice and returned to the course site. Nobody said anything to me about my disappearance for one day, not even the Teacher!

(The speaker, Dr. B.G. Savla of Gujarat, India, was one of the first assistant teachers appointed by Goenkaji, in December 1981.)

