



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Sukarāni asādhūni, attano abhitāni ca. Yam ve hitaṅca sādhuṅca, tam ve paramadukkaram.

Easy to do are things that are bad and harmful to oneself. But exceedingly difficult to do are things that are good and beneficial.

Dhammapada 12.163

HOW VIPASSANA PRISON COURSES STARTED

(From the Vipassana Research Institute, 2020)

Vipassana courses have been held in prisons in more than 20 countries. People often ask, “Where were the first prison courses? How did they come about?” The first prison courses happened thanks to the wisdom of three men: one who had the original idea for courses in prison, one who organized the first courses, and S. N. Goenkaji, who conducted the first courses in prison. Goenkaji went from his native Burma to teach Vipassana in India in 1969. A few years later, a Vipassana course was arranged by the daughter-in-law of Mahatma Gandhi at Sevagram Ashram. That is the ashram where Gandhi lived and taught from 1936 until his death in 1948.

Fifteen of Gandhi’s colleagues participated in the course. After it was over, they took Goenkaji to meet Vinoba Bhave, a saintly person of India, who lived nearby. He was quite enthusiastic about Vipassana and said that if it was beneficial and result-oriented, it must spread in the country. But he added, “I won’t accept this Vipassana unless it gives good results to two segments of the society: hardened criminals and schoolchildren.” Goenkaji replied, “I am certain it will be helpful. I am a newcomer to the country; I have brought this valuable jewel of Dhamma from outside. Now, let us make use of it for the country. Please make the arrangements.”

Vinoba Bhave arranged a course in India for teenagers. As with the many courses for children since then, this too was successful and he was very happy. Then he arranged for a course to be held in Gaya Jail. But the day before the course started, the jail officials informed Goenkaji he would have to stay outside the prison. Goenkaji said, “This is not possible... I must be there 24 hours a day. Something might happen, and I am responsible. I must stay inside.” They insisted, “According to the prison rules, you cannot stay inside.” Goenkaji replied, “Then give me a prison sentence of 10 days!” But they wouldn’t agree. Vinobaji wanted to make some other arrangements, but before he

was able to do so he passed away. Fortunately, a few years later, the Home Secretary of Rajasthan, Ram Singh, came to a course in Jaipur. He was very keen. He said, “This must be tried with criminals!” He also heard about the challenge from Vinoba Bhave. So Singh organized the first courses, which were held in the Jaipur Central Jail. The rules were amended to permit Goenkaji to stay inside the prison for the full 10 days. This was how prison courses began.



TROUBLE HAPPENS WHEN THE MIND IS TIED IN KNOTS

(From the Vipassana International Newsletter.)

This is an edited transcription of a story told by teacher S.N. Tandon during a Pali language workshop held in France in 2007.

Once I was invited to speak about Vipassana in an old people's home. A meditator happened to meet the chairman of the home, who told him, "We will give one hour to whoever comes to give a talk about something new." The meditator reported the invitation to me. I said, "Very good. This is a good occasion. I will certainly go."

When I reached there, they were celebrating the anniversary of the foundation of the home. All the members, nearly 70 of them – men, women, children – had come there. Food was also being prepared for them. They were so busy meeting each other that they forgot I was to speak for an hour. I was sitting on one side. I didn't know anybody except the student who had taken me there. I noticed that he went to the chairman and said, "Look, I brought the person who is going to deliver a talk." The chairman said, "What can I do? So many people have come. They are meeting each other, and they won't listen." But then he said, "Despite all that, we will give half an hour. Not an hour, but I'll manage to allow half an hour."

The student again said to the chairman, "This man has come. You had said one hour would be allotted, then half an hour, and now the food is ready and everyone will go to take the food. What is this?"

The chairman said, "Okay then, 15 minutes."

The student reported to me, saying, "What can I do? He is offering just 15 minutes."

I said, "Okay. Fifteen minutes also is good enough for me."

"Fifteen minutes?!"

"Yes," I said. "Even if it is 10 minutes, that is enough."

I remembered that it depends upon the mood of the people at that time. I could see that they were in no mood to listen to a speech about Vipassana. If the mind is free of all distractions, then Vipassana can click. I knew that their entire attention was on the table where food was to be served. And children were also there, aged 10 to 15. Men and women were there, everyone was in a different type of mood; who would listen to Vipassana? And now they were giving only 15 minutes.

The chairman announced, "We have invited someone to tell you about a meditation that is called Vipassana. For 15 minutes, would you please give him your attention." What did I do? I always carry a handkerchief in my pocket. You know, sometimes it is needed. I took out my handkerchief and asked the audience, "Do you see what this is?" Everybody thought, "What sort of meditation is this?" But immediately, a few of the people said, "Yes, it is a handkerchief, a hanky."

I said, "Yes, very good. Can somebody tell me, one by one, to what use is this handkerchief put? How is it used?"

"Quite an interesting subject!" someone said. "It is for wiping dust from the face."

"Very good," I replied. "It is used to wipe dust from the face. Anybody else?"

Then someone said, "If the eyes shed tears, it is used to wipe them away."

"Very good," I replied. "It is used to wipe tears from the eyes. Anybody else?"



Since the place was in Delhi and the month was June, there was scorching heat. Someone said, “Yes, when it is very hot, it is put on the head in order to provide protection from the heat.”

“Very good,” I repeated. “What else?”

Same thing: “It is used to wipe your nose when it drips.”

“What else?”

Now their minds started running in every way. Someone said, “If you break a finger, it can be used to bind it tightly.”

Another said, “Suppose a train is coming on the railway track and a vehicle is crossing, and an accident is going to occur, and you want to stop the train, you soak the handkerchief in red dye and flap it.” They were getting creative!

Then someone said, “Suppose a tap of water is running but the water is dirty. You use the handkerchief to filter the water.” Similarly, he said, “Suppose you go out to enjoy a garden or another place that is quite dirty. You can take out the handkerchief and clean a spot before sitting down.”



Then somebody said, “Suppose you want to do a magic trick. You can hide a coin in the handkerchief and make it seem to appear out of nowhere.”

So many things were mentioned. I knew that now they had forgotten about the food and anything else. I said, “Well, you have given so much information about how this handkerchief is used. Now see what I am doing.”

I tied the handkerchief in knots and asked, “What is this?”

“It is a handkerchief!”

I asked, “Now all these things that you told me, can you do them with this handkerchief?”

“No, no. That is not possible.”

I untied the knots and asked, “Now is it possible?”

“Oh yes, everything is possible!”

I said, “Each of you has a mind. When it is open, free, you can do anything – just as you can do anything with an open handkerchief. But if somebody says you are a fool or otherwise insults you, a knot is tied in the mind. When that happens, can you still use the mind freely? No, your entire attention is focused on asking ‘Why did he call me a fool?’ It becomes as useless as a handkerchief tied in knots.”

Then I said, “There is a technique of meditation called Vipassana. Whenever knots are tied in the mind, it is used to untie them, just as I have shown in the case of the handkerchief.”

They said, “Oh, very good! Where is it taught?” All within 15 minutes!

AND YOU THOUGHT YOUR COURSE WAS HARD...

(From the Vipassana International Newsletter.)

One of the most challenging and unusual Vipassana courses in prison happened in Colombia. Close to 80 Colombian inmates learned Vipassana in February 2016, in simultaneous men's and women's courses. The site was a medium-security prison complex near the city of Manizales, south of Medellín. The institution has a population of up to 1,500 inmates. There were 24 participants in the men's course. According to the conducting teacher, they worked seriously and sat very strongly. They loved the discourses and asked excellent questions.

The director of the women's prison had made possible the first courses for female inmates in Colombia, in 2011. The changes she saw in participants after the first course convinced her of the value of the program, and later she sat 10 days herself. She in turn convinced the administration of the men's prison at Manizales to allow a course.

Thanks to her enthusiasm in promoting the course, a total of 73 women joined it. Everything went smoothly until minutes before the evening group sitting on Day 6. As the students were about to enter the meditation hall, a fierce storm hit the prison. In an instant, the roof and walls of the hall collapsed, trapping a server under the wreckage inside. The meditators rescued the server, who fortunately suffered no serious injury. But as sirens sounded and rescue vehicles converged on the site, the students were badly shaken.

This was not the only problem. The storm caused extensive damage to the women's side of the prison, which dated from the late 1940s. Somehow, the staff managed to cobble together another space for meditation, but many of the women had lost their sleeping place. In these very difficult conditions, 19 of the women decided to leave. Once things settled down, the prison director offered to suspend the course. However, the remaining 54 women expressed a desire to continue, and all of them completed the course.

After the courses were over, the director and security staff of the men's prison immediately asked to schedule more. The conducting teacher proposed dates for courses to be held about eight months later. The prison officials responded, "That's not soon enough! After what we've seen here, we need it earlier." Eventually they settled on mid-July for another men's course. Dates for another women's course would have to be decided later, when reconstruction had progressed. The experience at Manizales motivated several members of the security staff to join courses outside the prison. Some staff members have shifted to other prisons and are interested in arranging for courses there.

In both the men's and women's prisons, those who participated in the course have had the opportunity to join weekly group sittings as well as one-day courses. A security officer who sat a course in Colombia now has a senior position at a mega-prison. After his course, he said, "I'll be waiting for you (the Prison Trust) at my new place of work so that we can offer much larger courses." While rebuilding the damaged portions of Manizales prison, courses for women were offered at Pereira. That is where, back in 2011, Colombia's first prison course took place.

