



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

Volume XX • December 2020

WORDS OF DHAMMA

Na tam mātā pitā kayirā aññe vāpi ca nātakā sammāpanihitam cittam seyyaso nam tato kare.

No mother nor father nor any other kin can do greater good for oneself than a mind directed well.

Dhammapada 3.43

HOW TO OVERCOME HABITS THAT HARM YOU

S.N. Goenka visited prisons and answered prisoners' questions all around the world. Here is a sample of questions he answered during a visit to Nasik Jail in India on February 16, 1996. (From the Vipassana Research Institute.)

Q: A meditation course has been held here before, and we got some peace, but we still cannot control our mind.

S. N. Goenka: Which means something was missing. It is one thing to keep the mind occupied in some activity, and quite another thing to go deep within the mind to remove its defilements by the roots. Once this is done, peace comes by itself.

Q: I want to change myself completely.

S. N. Goenka: That is what this technique is all about. You will totally change, I guarantee it. But you will have to work for it. You cannot hope to change just by getting the blessings of some guru. You have to work yourself.

Q: I want to lead a peaceful life. Sometimes in the night, all alone, I feel like I am choking.

S. N. Goenka: I can understand your problem very well. This technique will help you remove such suffering. Now when we suffer, we tend to ascribe it to external reasons: "He did this or like that, that is why I am miserable." When you learn to look within you will realize, "I have defiled my mind and that is why I am unhappy." Remove the defilement and see: the misery goes away.

Q: I want to stay away from anger, yet it does not leave me.

S. N. Goenka: That is the whole problem. No one wants to generate anger, but what to do? It happens. This technique will help you come out of that habit. This habit of generating anger, it is like a jail. You can come out of this jail.

Q: I try to think good of everyone all the time. Still I am miserable and bad things keep happening to me.

S. N. Goenka: You think good of others, that is very nice. But that is only at the surface level of the mind. What about the rest of the mind? That is full of defilement. There is craving and aversion in this mind which is making you miserable. So if you try to improve things at the surface level, it does not work for long. Until the roots are cured you cannot find real peace.

Q: Where can I find pacification?

S. N. Goenka: Within oneself.



A SIMPLE TECHNIQUE WITH PROFOUND RESULTS

(From the Vipassana International Newsletter.)

The following is an edited excerpt of a talk given by Goenkaji in September 1991, at Yangon University in Myanmar.

When a friend suggested that I learn Vipassana from Sayagyi U Ba Khin, I thought to myself, “What is the use of going to this person and learning his technique when the same thing exists in the scriptures of my own religion?” But as I underwent the process, I realized that what I was learning from him was applied Dhamma. Instead of beliefs, the Buddha taught how to practice. That practice is what I learned from Sayagyi when I came for a Vipassana course under his guidance.

First was the training of *sīla*, moral conduct. “Very good,” I thought. “I have no objection to that.” Next was the training of *samādhi* to gain control over my mind. Again I thought, “Very good.” But at once I noticed something new to me. Sayagyi taught mental control through the practice of *Anapana*, that is, observing respiration. The tradition in which I had been born and raised also taught observation of respiration, but along with the breath a word was usually added, a verbalization. Or else it might be a visualization, perhaps the image of a deity or saintly person.

To all of that, Sayagyi said no. He told me, “Observe the respiration as it is. No verbalization, no visualization, no imagination. The breath as it is.” He also told me: “You are not here to control your breath. Observe the natural respiration as it is, not as you would like it to be.” Oh, this was something new taught by the Buddha: “as it is.” If the breath is deep, let it be deep. If it is shallow, let it be shallow. Don’t interfere with nature, let it play its own role. Just observe. Do nothing.

This was not what I had practiced before, and mentally I kept arguing about it, questioning it. But I also kept working as my teacher told me, and I started getting the benefit. Suppose you are observing respiration... Then suddenly your mind wanders to a past incident when someone abused you. You recall it and you start reacting with anger. At once, you notice that your breath has changed. It has become harder, faster. And when the anger passes, the breath returns to normal. The same happens with passion or any other strong emotion that arises in the mind.

If you add a word or image to the observation of breath, if you make it a breathing exercise, you won’t be able to understand what the Buddha wanted to teach you: how mind and matter are interrelated, how one influences the other. You have to understand it at the experiential level. As you observe natural breath, you start understanding, “Yes, the breath is related not only to the body but also to the mind, and especially to the impurities of the mind.” Wherever there is life, there is bound to be sensation. Wherever mind and matter come into contact, there is bound to be sensation. Sensation occurs in the body but it is



felt by the mind. Mind and matter both are included in it. Just as the breath changes when anger or another strong emotion arises, similarly the physical sensations change according to what happens in the mind. The meditator might feel heat arising, or tension or pressure. Some biochemical reaction starts, some sensation. This is what the Buddha wanted us to understand.

In India, from ancient times to the present, the word veda (used for ancient scriptures) has meant knowledge based on experience. For example, there is a sensation, pleasant or unpleasant. And look, you are reacting with craving or aversion. This is your experience. And you see that you become miserable when you react with craving or aversion. You also see that when you do not react with craving toward pleasant sensations and aversion toward unpleasant ones, there is no misery for you.



Your direct experience, that is vedanā. If you are unaware of vedanā, whatever you try to understand of Buddha's teaching is just at the surface level. Sayagyi U Ba Khin taught me to observe vedanā, sensation. Observing it enabled me to understand that the role of vedanā is what makes the Buddha's teaching unique. You have a pleasant sensation, and craving starts. You have an unpleasant sensation and aversion starts. Both the craving and the aversion start because of vedanā. Suppose you feel the pleasant sensation and do not react with craving. You feel the unpleasant sensation and you don't react with aversion. If so, you are coming out of misery. It is so simple.

If you generate craving and aversion, you are bound to burn. Whatever philosophy you believe, whatever religious ceremonies you perform, you are bound to burn. If you don't want to suffer the misery of burning, the best thing is to stay away from fire. If you keep away from craving and aversion, you won't burn. Whatever label you give yourself doesn't matter; you won't burn. But how can you avoid generating craving and aversion? This is what the Buddha taught. And if there is no craving or aversion, there is no suffering.

This contribution of the Buddha strongly attracted me, and now I find it is attracting people around the world – even people highly suspicious of the Buddha's teaching. They all can benefit, provided they practice. Without actual practice, it doesn't work. The practice changes the habit pattern of the mind so that it gradually reacts less, and finally one reaches the stage where there is no more craving,

no more aversion. It is a wonderful path, a wonderful technique. But you have to walk on the path. You have to practice the technique and experience it. Only the actual practice can help.

May all of you experience pure Dhamma. May all of you come out of your misery and experience real peace, real harmony, real happiness.

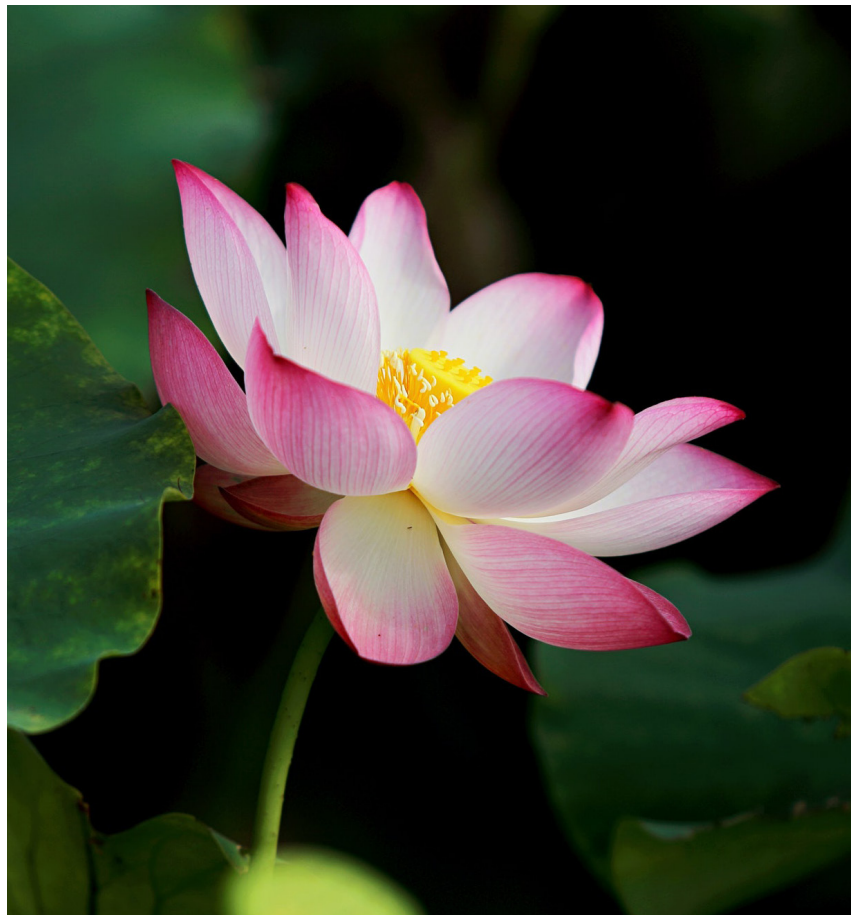
A MEDITATOR'S NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

(From the Vipassana International Newsletter.)

A doctor named Umesh, who practices general medicine in Australia, learned Vipassana in Sri Lanka in 2003. After suffering a heart attack at the age of 43, he recorded his experiences.

On August 28, 2014, I nearly died. That day, I had an early morning house call. During it, I felt symptoms of indigestion. I ignored them but they persisted. After the call, I started to drive home but the discomfort worsened and became chest pain, radiating into my left arm and jaw. I was sweating profusely and felt shortness of breath. I managed to reach my home, entered and sat down. I took off my sweat-drenched jacket and told my wife what was happening. I opened my emergency bag, took an aspirin and used a spray medication. I then called emergency services and said I thought I was having a heart attack.

The ambulance arrived very quickly, and the team began attending to me. I felt as if an elephant was sitting on my chest. Still, I was fully alert and conscious. Without deciding to do it, I found that I was practicing Vipassana. Part of my mind was observing sensations and not reacting to them. I was in a lot of pain but at the same time there was no pain at all. There was not a trace of worry in my mind, no anxiety or fear. Instead, I felt relaxed and peaceful. I



realized that I could not take anything or anybody with me – not my wife, my son or parents, nothing that I owned. Just myself. No, not even myself – nothing. Instead of sadness or worry, I felt at peace. I felt spiritual.

The attendant confirmed that I was having a heart attack. I think I said, “That’s okay,” and smiled. I also laughed. Honestly, I hadn’t felt better in a very long time. The attendants put me in the ambulance. Now I was practicing Vipassana lying down, observing my sensations arising and passing. I thought, “Anicca, anicca. Everything is impermanent.” I was taken to the hospital cardiac catheterization lab. It was a short journey but felt long.

Three or four people clustered around me, attaching leads to my chest, inserting small tubes in my forearms, removing my clothing, prepping me for surgery, connecting me to a monitor. The oxygen mask made it difficult for me to talk. But I was smiling because

I felt good. The cardiologist explained that he was going to insert a stent to open a blocked coronary artery. As he performed the procedure, the pain at first worsened. Once the blood was able to flow through the artery, the pain went away. After the surgery, I had to spend four hours immobile in the recovery room. This was fine with me because I could practice Vipassana.

Six months later, I feel that this experience opened me up to reality. There was a strong chance I could have died. At the moment of death, you don’t have many choices. All you can control is how you react to the present moment. Life has changed for me. What once seemed important has become unimportant, and what I never cared about has become the center of my life. Through Vipassana, I learned real equanimity. I learned this and so much more.