



# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XXI • JANUARY • 2021

## WORDS OF DHAMMA

*Yogā ve jāyati bhūri, ayogā bhūrisankhayo.*

*Etam dvedhāpatham nātvā bhavāya vibhavāya ca, tathāttānam niveseyya yathā bhūri pavaddhati.*

Wisdom springs from meditation; without meditation wisdom wanes. Having known these two paths of progress and decline, let one so conduct oneself that one's wisdom may increase.

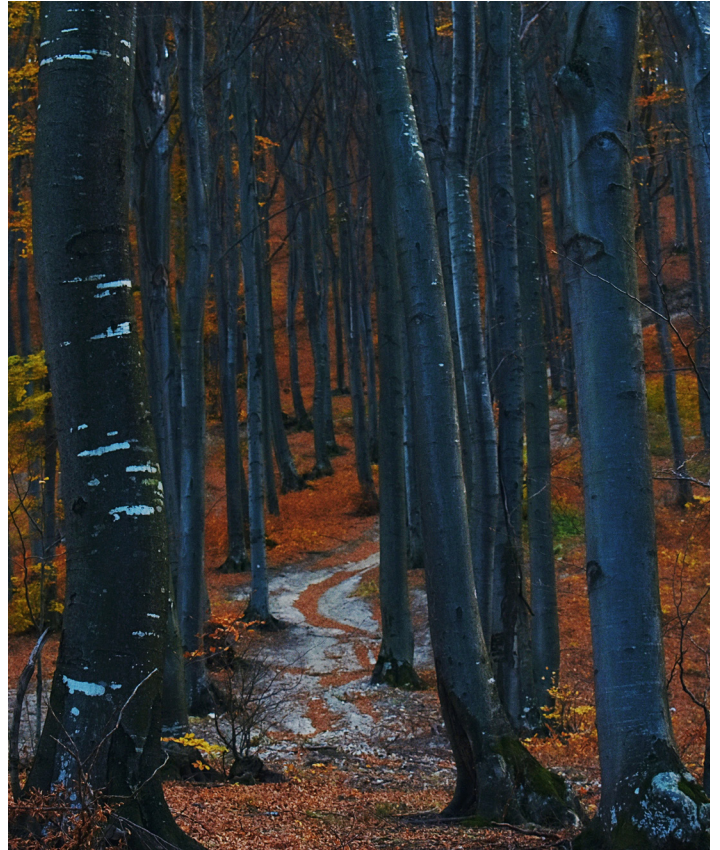
*Dhammapada 20.282*

## PRACTICING MEDITATION DURING A PANDEMIC

From the International Vipassana Newsletter, November 2020

For most of us, the pandemic started with reports of a strange disease appearing somewhere far away. We felt distress and compassion, maybe even shock. But we also felt comfort that it was not happening where we lived, it was not happening to us. Soon that confidence began to fade as the virus scaled mountain ranges, sped across oceans and became our present reality around the globe. No longer was it somewhere else; it was here and now.

Going outside became confronting a challenge. Walking became traversing an obstacle course. Following the news became an exercise in grief. In all the decades since Vipassana became available outside Myanmar, this had never happened. It was unthinkable, and yet it was happening. It was happening to us. Some people responded with denial, some with depression, some with anger or disbelief. Some responded with courage when that was all there was left. Amid this storm, truths told to us again and again took on a new immediacy: Whatever arises passes away. Everything in this world keeps changing. Everything is impermanent, beyond our control. Whenever we cling to something that is bound to change, we are bound to suffer.



But the Buddha taught that there is a way to come out of suffering: by understanding what is happening at the deep, experiential level. This is something we can do, even if only a little, every time we try to observe ourselves, the reality within. For a Vipassana meditator all that's needed is a quiet place to sit down, close eyes and look inside, to patiently try to be aware of physical sensations and not react to them, and by this effort to gradually cultivate equanimity. This ability to accept reality without reacting is what can lead to liberation.

For many of us, our daily meditation has become more important than ever. We still feel part of a community of people around the world, people who are using self-observation to navigate a way through these days of pain and turmoil. A way that leads to peace and happiness. We have not yet arrived at that destination, and we cannot know how long a journey remains. We can be sure that there are plenty of challenges ahead. But we also know that every moment of equanimity is a step closer toward the goal. Every moment of equanimity gives us the strength to feel love and compassion for those around us, for ourselves, for all who are suffering in this imperfect world. With that strength, with that balance of mind, may we keep walking on the path to the end of suffering.

## INTEGRITY COUNTS FOR MORE THAN MONEY

From the Vipassana Research Institute Newsletter, November 12, 2019

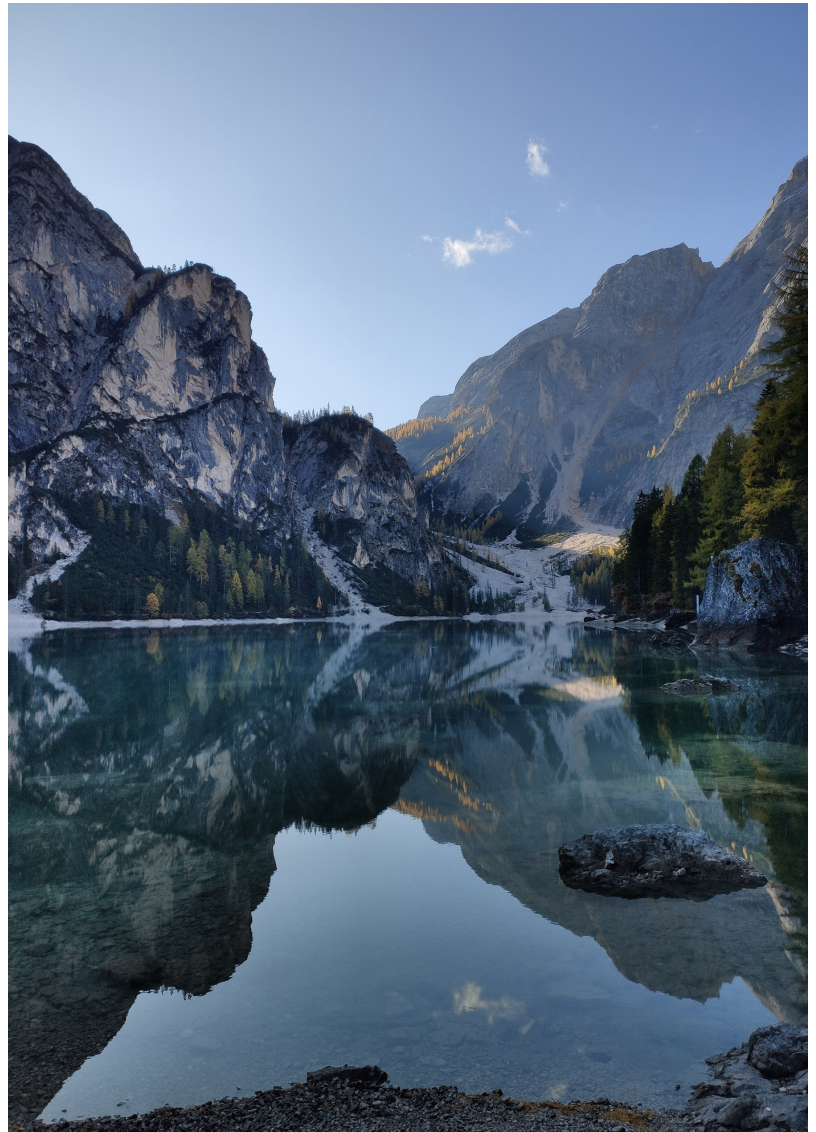
*Here S.N. Goenka talks about his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Excerpted from the "Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal."*

In Burma during the time of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, certain high government posts ensured comfort for the remainder of an appointee's life—not due to the level of salary, but rather to the pervasive practice of padding all transactions with bribery. No one came out of these offices as a poor person. Sayagyi, however, entered his retirement with meager life savings and no home of his own for his family, since they had lived in government housing all his career. Wanting to build a house for his children, he asked me to help him arrange for the construction. As work on the house proceeded, we found that 10,000 rupees were lacking. Where was Sayagyi to get this money?

Since such a sum was easy for me to give, I suggested this. But he refused, insisting that any money from a student is dana (donation), and therefore to be put to proper Dhamma use. Trying a different angle, I offered to lend him the money, thinking that later I could just tell him to disregard repayment. He accepted my offer, and the house was completed. However, each and every month thereafter, when his pension cheque arrived, he took not one penny, but passed the whole amount to me. This was so painful to accept. These 10,000 rupees meant little to me, and here each month I had to receive my teacher's only income. Eventually 5,000 rupees remained to be paid. During this time, my aunt (who had adopted me as her son and who had been a long-time student of Sayagyi's) was dying. She had made great progress in seven years of meditation with Sayagyi, and he was quite fond of her.

Now, it is a custom in the Eastern countries not only to care for one's parents during their lifetime, but also to remember them by making contributions in their name after death. As I passed the last days with my adoptive mother, I asked her to tell me where she wished to give this money. When she said that she wanted 5,000 rupees to go to Sayagyi himself, I was delighted. Surely, I thought, Sayagyi would accept the last wish of a devoted student, and be able to use it for repayment of the loan.

As it happened, a few days later Sayagyi was present at the time of her death; he knew that she had died peacefully and consciously, with awareness of anicca (impermanence) at the top of her head. He went around the center telling everyone how her final minutes were filled with anicca. When I informed him of her wish to give him 5,000 rupees he was delighted – and began distributing it to this Dhamma cause and that Dhamma cause! I was so surprised to see my hopes dashed. Each month thereafter, as I received my teacher's pension cheque, until at last the final payment, I was reminded of the high principles of this person. He was such an example of moral rectitude in public office. Having passed through the corridors of power, which were rampant with corruption, where fortunes were often easily amassed, here was a singular man of modest means who died with the wealth of his integrity fully intact.



## FREING THE MIND IN PRISONS AROUND THE WORLD

---

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, July 2016



*Vipassana courses have been offered in prisons in more than 20 countries. One of the smallest countries is Ireland; one of the largest, India. No matter where the courses are held, the point is always the same: freeing the mind from mental habits that hurt, rather than help us. Here is information on Vipassana courses being conducted in prisons in India and Ireland.*

The first course in prison in Ireland took place in 2015, after three years of patient effort. The course was in a low-security prison, Loughan House, in Blacklion, County Cavan. Loughan House is an open prison for men aged 18 and over. Many of the inmates go out during the day to study nearby. They also work on site, for example by repairing bicycles and taking care of an organic vegetable garden. Before the course was organized, two members of the Loughan House staff attended a 10-day Vipassana course. One of them served as liaison between the prison administration and the course management team. When the teacher and four managers arrived the day before the course was to start, preparations were well under way to create a temporary meditation center within the prison. A ground floor theater room became the meditation hall, and the billiard room next door became the dining hall.

Accommodation was on an upper story, with most students in single rooms. Outdoors, a grassy area and a tennis court served as a walking area. The prison kitchen was ready to prepare meals for the course, following a vegetarian menu. Eight students started the course, ranging in age from 29 to 49. As the days passed, they worked more and more seriously. It was obvious that Vipassana was having a strong impact on them. On Metta Day, there was a small reception to congratulate the participants and hear about their experiences. On hand for the event were the prison governor and some staff members, other inmates, the conducting teacher, course managers and family members of the participants. To celebrate the occasion there were balloons, cake, flowers and a sunny sky. Group sittings have continued at Loughan House in Ireland.

Meanwhile in India... with more than 110 million people the state of Maharashtra has a population larger than that of most countries. Since 2011, the state government has officially mandated the use of Vipassana meditation as a rehabilitation tool for inmates. Many correctional institutions have found it challenging to create a separate, sealed compound containing all the facilities needed for participants during a Vipassana course. At last count, five prisons in the state are able to offer the 10-day retreats. In 2016 the Police Department of Maharashtra issued a directive calling for the adoption of Anapana meditation programs in prisons as an interim measure. In 38 institutions, with a total of 29,000 inmates, all inmates have 10 minutes in the morning and evening to practice Anapana, with instructions broadcast over the prison public address system.

The directive went on to state that those who are eligible and interested will be able to go on to learn Vipassana at one of the prisons offering 10-day courses. There are also plans to teach Anapana to new recruits in police training academies. In addition, prison officers and guards throughout Maharashtra state are entitled to special leave to attend a Vipassana course.

## PRACTICE MEDITATION TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE

---

From the International Vipassana Newsletter, June 2017

*S.N. Goenka answered thousands of questions during his more than 40 years as a Vipassana teacher. Here are excerpts from a Q&A at Yangon University in Myanmar in 1991.*

Q: The Buddha taught us how to come out of suffering. Why is there still so much suffering in the world?

A: The Buddha taught the way. But his teaching will not help if we do not practice it. If people do not practice the teaching, they are bound to suffer. This is the law of nature.

Q: What happens when a person dies?

A: When I will die, I may be able to say what happens. I cannot say now. But one thing is sure: the life that begins with birth and ends with death is not everything. There is a flow that continues even after death. The flow may take you in a good or bad direction. A human life gives you the opportunity to change the direction of this flow. Nature has given human beings the capacity to go to the depths of reality and change the flow of life.



Q: You said that you were fortunate to have been born in this land of Dhamma. Does that mean that people born in countries where Dhamma is not practiced are less fortunate?

A: Certainly. If people don't come into contact with pure Dhamma, how can we say that they are fortunate? They may earn millions and millions of money, but that doesn't give them real peace, real happiness. When they get Dhamma and practice Dhamma, they enjoy real peace, real harmony. Then the purpose of life is fulfilled. If people born in other countries still come in contact with pure Dhamma, they too are fortunate. But the trouble is that in other countries the teaching has been lost. Here, in this country, it is still maintained. That is why we say that Myanmar is very fortunate.

Q: What are the benefits of practicing meditation?

A: On the mundane level, Dhamma is a way of life that makes you happy, peaceful, harmonious, and it makes you generate peace and harmony for others. You live a better life. Dhamma thus is an art of living.

At the same time, it leads to the highest goal, which is freedom from all misery. Meditation starts changing people in this very life. If students learn the technique when they are young, their entire life will be peaceful and harmonious. Today, drug use is a growing problem, including among students. Vipassana has helped them so much. Those who practice Vipassana have no interest in experimenting with drugs. Meditation helps in every way.