



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Mattāsukhapariccāgā passe ce vipulam sukham, caje mattāsukham dhīro, sampassam vipulam sukham.

If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness,
let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater.

Dhammapada 21.290

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN BRAINS OF MEDITATORS – STUDY

From the Vipassana Research Institute Newsletter, April 2018



A detailed research paper on brain function during meditation was conducted following the cooperation of Vipassana meditators over four years, 2012 - 2016. The study was published in the international journal "Biological Psychology." Here is the researchers' summary.

These studies were carried out in the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences in Bangalore, India. Many Vipassana meditators participated in the study; some had undergone two or three 10-day Vipassana courses, some had done long courses, and some are assistant Teachers of Vipassana. The following are our findings:

- 1) All meditators had positive EEG reports during meditation, as compared to when at rest. (EEG – electroencephalogram – tests detect electrical activity in the brain. The cells in the brain communicate via electrical impulses and are always active, even when we sleep.)
- 2) Even at rest, Teachers and senior meditators had higher theta-alpha waves and lower low-gamma waves. This means that many years of meditation practice brings about fundamental changes in the brain circuitry (called neuroplasticity). Even when they are not doing meditation, their brains function differently and may be more detached and have an objective view (equanimity) towards oneself and others. This may explain why long-term meditators often have better well-being.
- 3) Beginners had more delta and low-gamma waves throughout. This indicates that beginners put in a lot of effort to maintain meditative states. Long-term meditators can reach meditative states with less effort.
- 4) During meditation, Teachers and senior meditators had more low-alpha waves than the group of new students during all the meditative states (Anapana, Vipassana and Metta). Low-alpha waves in the brain are enhanced when we try to focus our attention on a thought/object and attempt to sustain it. These waves are also associated with preventing distraction. Thus, long-term meditators were less distracted during meditation states than the beginners.
- 5) Interestingly, we found that only Teachers had changes in brain complexity for all meditative states, while senior students did not show any changes. This indicates that even though both Teachers and senior students are long-term meditators, the brain activity of Teachers works more efficiently.

The above findings point toward neuroplasticity: the wonderful ability of our brain to reorganize the brain circuitry by forming new connections. Proficient meditation could bring in these changes, which might explain the enhanced well-being associated with Vipassana practice. We take the opportunity to thank all our meditator participants of the study. Without their co-operation, this would not have been possible. We also thank the Vipassana Research Institute for extending support and encouragement to facilitate the study.

HOW TO PURIFY YOUR MIND AT THE DEEPEST LEVEL

From the Vipassana Research Institute Newsletter, June 2015

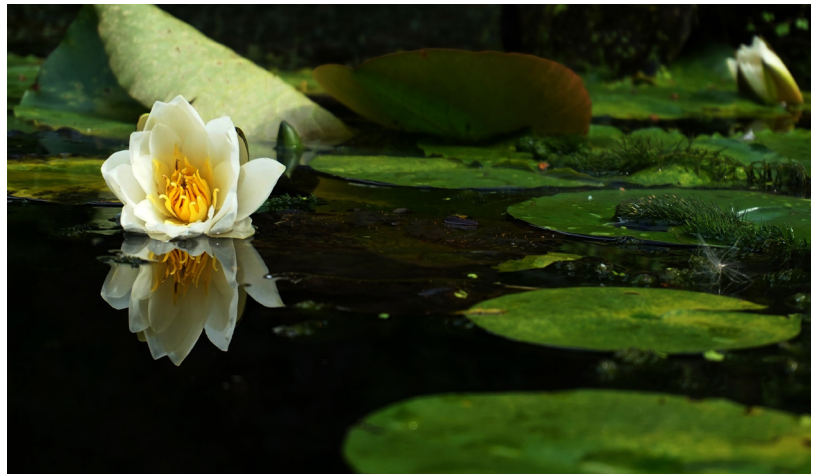
On September 6, 1991, the auditorium was packed at Yangon University in Myanmar, and hundreds more people waited outside, hoping to hear the proceedings. In the audience were scholars, dignitaries, intellectuals and lay people, as well as a contingent of Buddhist monks sitting on the stage. As people so often do in Myanmar, they had gathered to hear the Dhamma expounded. This was perfectly ordinary. But there was nothing ordinary about the speaker, S.N. Goenka, making his way to the front of the hall.

First, he was not Burmese. Although born in Myanmar, he came from a family of Indian migrants and had been steeped in the Hindu spiritual tradition. He was also not a member of the congregation of monks, whose role it is to teach the Dhamma. Though once a prominent businessman in Myanmar, he left the country in 1969 and had not returned except for a brief visit in 1990.

Yet all these people now waited breathlessly for him to speak. They knew that whatever else he might or might not be, Goenkaji was heir to a tradition lovingly preserved in Myanmar through the generations, a teaching that was the essence of what the Buddha taught. They knew that he had proved the power of the teaching by bringing it to many thousands of people in India and around the world. Now here he was, bringing the Dhamma to them.

For Goenkaji, as well, it must have been a special moment. During his two decades away from Myanmar, he had always hoped to return, but the door seemed to have closed behind him when he left. At last the door had reopened, and he was received with honor and respect. Most important, he had the opportunity to present the Dhamma in the way his teacher had shown it to him: as a universal, non-sectarian teaching, bringing happiness to many and leading to liberation from suffering. Following is an extract from the talk Goenkaji gave on that day.

This is the beauty of the Buddha's teaching: it is so complete that nothing has to be added to it. If you just practice sila (morality), samadhi (mastery of the mind) and panna (experiential wisdom), that is enough. And it is so pure that nothing has to be taken out. If we make a sect out of the Buddha's teaching, a blind faith or a philosophy, then difficulty arises. Every sect will have its own philosophy, belief, dogma, rites, rituals, ceremonies, and they all differ. But a Buddha teaches Dhamma. A Buddha does not establish a particular religion. A Buddha is not interested in establishing a sect.



On one occasion, when the Buddha was explaining Dhamma to some people, he said: "I am not interested in making you my disciples. I am not interested in snatching you away from your old gurus. Your aim is to become liberated from misery. I am not interested in taking you away from that aim. Everyone wants to come out of misery. Nobody wants to live a miserable life. I am here to help you fulfill your aim, to come out of misery. I have a technique for doing that. Give it a trial." This was Buddha's way of teaching. He was so detached.

If so many people in the world start calling themselves Buddhists, do you think Buddha would be very happy about that? Not at all. If people start practicing sila, samadhi, and panna, then Buddha's teaching has started giving fruit. Suppose one calls oneself a Buddhist but does not practice sila, samadhi, and panna. What benefit will that person get from the teaching of the Buddha? Suppose one does not call oneself a Buddhist but practices sila, samadhi, and panna – that person will get the benefit, will come out of misery. The teaching must be practiced, and practiced at the experiential level. Merely playing devotional or intellectual games in the name of Dhamma is not sufficient. It is the experiential part of Dhamma that gives results.

Other spiritual teachers kept saying, "Live a moral life. Develop control of the mind. Purify your mind. Remain detached. Remain free from craving, free from aversion." But no one else could say, "This is how to become free of craving and aversion. This is how to purify your mind at the deepest level." The biggest contribution of Buddha was that he explained how. The Buddha's teaching seems so simple, but to actually practice Dhamma is difficult. One

has to work hard. Listening to discourses or reading scriptures or discussing what you hear is good. But if you keep on just discussing and debating without practicing, it doesn't work. You have to start taking steps on the path of Dhamma. Otherwise, you don't get the fruits of Dhamma.

A Buddha teaches Dhamma, the universal law of nature, which is applicable to one and all. And he teaches in very simple language. We make it complicated. Instead of practicing it, we make it into a philosophy and we start fighting: "Your belief is wrong. My belief is right."

What will we gain by that? Even if my belief is in fact right but I don't practice it, what is the use of this belief?



OBSERVE THE WORLD WITHOUT BEING MISERABLE

From the Vipassana Research Institute Newsletter, January 2020

S.N. Goenka answered thousands of questions during more than 50 years as a Vipassana teacher. Here is a sample question and answer that followed a talk Goenkaji gave in Ashland, Oregon on June 15, 2002.

Q: News broadcasts are full of suffering and negativity, and it is hard to keep a calm mind when watching them. Should we avoid them?

A: Watch them and remain equanimous! If you watch them and you lose your equanimity, then you have started suffering. Observe what is happening in the world, but see that you don't become a part of that misery. Through meditation you work to keep yourself away from misery. Generate purity, love and compassion, and that will have its own effect on the atmosphere as well.

WHEN FACING A STORM, SEEK A SAFE HARBOR

From the April 2020 newsletter of the Vipassana Research Institute

The following article by S.N. Goenka was first published in the June 1977 issue of the Hindi-language Vipashyana Patrika.



My dear meditators!

Come, let us take refuge in the Dhamma.

Refuge in the Dhamma is greatly beneficial.

Dhamma is truth; it is the very law of nature, it is the law that applies to the entire world; everything is dependent on Dhamma. Every atom, every object, the entire universe operates on the basis of Dhamma.

Dhamma is boundless, infinite and illimitable. It exists in every particle, every atom. It is all-pervading, all-powerful and supreme.

Dear meditators, whenever you face difficulties in life, due to storms or typhoons, or a feeling of helplessness, learn to take refuge in the Dhamma. Refuge in the Dhamma brings great relief.

At times a fiendish storm in the form of a war, or a famine, or an outbreak of disease may occur. Or great waves may rise up in a placid lake, and these high waves hiss at us like a poisonous cobra. Or perhaps a destructive, violent whirlpool threatens to pull everyone into it.

At such times, even our friends may run away or avert their gaze. Even our near and dear ones are busy protecting their own lives; all those drowning are looking for anything to grasp that could save them. Friends and family members turn their backs.

At such times, my dear meditators, only the Dhamma provides us shelter. The Dhamma becomes our anchor; the Dhamma becomes our island.

When a person is weak and in misery, if he surrenders himself to the Dhamma and begins to practice Dhamma with complete devotion and sincerity, the Dhamma then becomes his armor and starts to protect him. Dhamma never cheats, never belies our trust, never pushes us down.

Truly it brings great relief when you surrender yourselves to the Dhamma, take refuge in the Dhamma. Even if only for a little while, try to look inward and allow yourself to be in the flow of Dhamma. It will give you great strength and self-confidence.

By being in the flow of Dhamma, we stop creating new habit patterns. Then an opportunity to get rid of old habit patterns comes, and the storms that have arisen due to these old habit patterns will begin to lose their strength. This is how one takes refuge in the Dhamma.

Practice Vipassana when facing any difficulty. Your surroundings will be filled with hope and energy. The whole atmosphere will be filled with beneficial vibrations. Your future will be filled with auspicious joy.

That is why, oh meditators, come, let us take refuge in the Dhamma. Refuge in the Dhamma is truly beneficial.