



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Abhittharetha kalyāne; pāpā cittam nivāraye. Dandhañhi karoto puññam, pāpasmim ramatī mano.

Hasten to do good; restrain your mind from evil.
One who is slow in doing good, that one's mind delights in evil.

Dhammapada 9.116

THIS LEADS TO A RICHER EMOTIONAL LIFE

An excerpt from a pariyatti.org transcript of a talk given in Massachusetts in 2000 by Vipassana teacher Paul Fleischman

Vipassana is based upon a very simple idea, which is: do what helps others, don't do what hurts others, and purify your own heart and mind. Those first two phrases are clearly about ethical conduct, and the third phrase is about mental and emotional life – the purification of the heart and mind. So the Buddha's ideas are startlingly simple: to do what makes you feel your life is a better life, to not do what makes you feel your life is a worse life, and to give you a tool to discern what really leads to happiness and what does not lead to happiness.

In the Buddha's teaching there is a large category of emotions that are considered positive or beneficial for human emotional life. The Buddha's list of negative emotions, meanwhile, is extremely short. Those emotions which are harmful on the path are just a few: hatred, ill will, passion, fear. If you have the opportunity to talk to students taking their first meditation course, or if you're conducting meditation courses, there are many small, specific questions about details of technique. But the commonest big question is: "does this mean I'm not supposed to have emotions?" Somehow there is a confusion between the concepts of harmony and equanimity on the one hand, and on the other hand the absence of emotion.



So the fear that many people have – and maybe it's a Western cultural stereotype that we find repeating in our students who take Vipassana courses – is the fear that equanimity/serenity is the same thing as what psychiatrists call flat affect: having no emotions, not being involved in life, not caring. Frequently people ask, "does Vipassana mean I'm not supposed to care about things? Or I'm not supposed to love my family?" I mean, it should be intuitively obvious that the answer is no, but this is a key point... Vipassana is a meditation practice that deepens human emotional life. By practicing Vipassana your emotions should become deeper, not shallower. Instead of flattened affect, you should have deeper affect.

But some emotions should certainly be diminished. I would say absolutely everybody who practices Vipassana finds an automatic diminution of emotions such as hatred, ill will and fear. So while some emotions decrease, mostly there's an increase. The cultivation of a rich emotional life is a core aspect of Vipassana practice. And it's also non-sectarian. It has nothing to do with any boundary

between any ethnic group or any religion. That's the starting point, I think, when we look around the world today and see how Vipassana has spread. Vipassana helps those emotions that almost all people wish they had more of: love, compassion, goodwill. And it diminishes those emotions that we all wish we had less of.

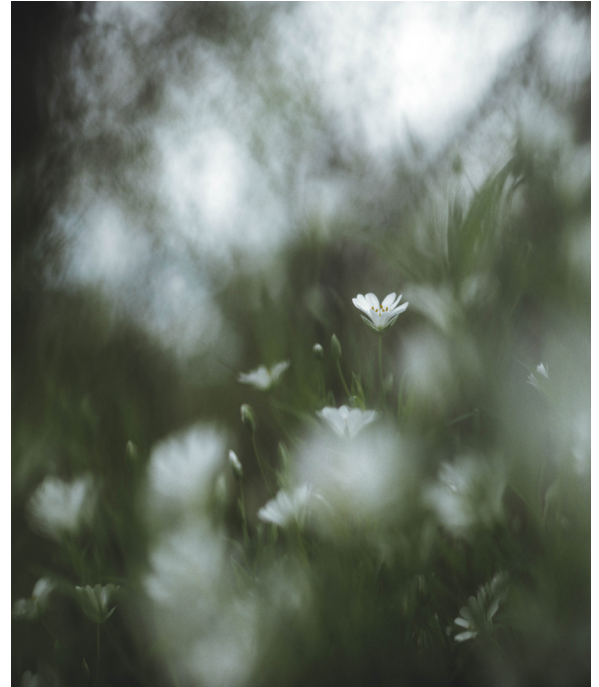
FEAR OF DEATH, WHILE UNDERSTANDABLE, IS NOT NECESSARY

From the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter, November 2016

The inspiring exchange is adapted from a 1995 conversation between S.N. Goenka and an Indian Vipassana meditator who had undergone two surgeries for thyroid cancer. She was cured but remained fearful and therefore sought Goenkaji's guidance. As of 2016, she was alive and well and serving as a teacher in Vipassana.

Student: Gurujī, I am afraid, though I know this should not be so.

Goenkaji: Because the understanding has not deepened. To develop deeper understanding whenever you feel anxious and fearful just observe it: "Oh, fear has arisen, now let me watch what sensations it brings." At that time the sensations that arise will be linked to and filled with fear. Observe that. A part of the mind will be rolling in that fear, yet another part will be aware of sensations. Maybe just 5% of the mind will be aware, the remaining 95% will be rolling in fear, yet that 5% is powerful enough to cut the roots of the fear, even if the mind is able to watch sensations only briefly. We also know that, like these sensations, the fear and worry are also ephemeral, they will not stay forever. If we continue to watch with this understanding, then the worry starts weakening until it all dissolves. You are cutting the roots, though it seems like the tree canopy is growing and spreading. A time will come when the tree will fall down. Have no fear now that you have entered the path of Vipassana.



If the mind rolls fully 100% in fear then indeed the fear will multiply. At least this much we must learn from Vipassana: we must strengthen a portion of our mind sufficiently for it to witness fear. There is an ailment and we worry over its outcome. We watch this worry and we watch the sensations being generated. Sensations and worry, we observe this again and again. Sensation starts as soon as a seed is planted. This is the law of nature. Seed and fruit both give rise to sensation and though the fruit is yet to take shape the sensation has already arisen and we can start watching it objectively. Awareness with equanimity weakens it. A non-meditator on the other hand is unaware and indulges in worry which strengthens the fruit that has to come. Do not strengthen the unwanted event through lack of awareness. Do not walk backwards.

Student: I feel guilty that I am not fulfilling my responsibility towards the children, and especially at the thought that they would have to serve me in case I fall very ill. This churns in my heart.

Goenkaji: Thinking about this constantly is inviting this eventuality. There is a story. A man is sitting under a wish-fulfilling tree: he gets whatever he wishes for. However, his wishes come at random. He thinks, "what if a lion comes?", and it happens. Then he thinks, "the lion will eat me up!", and it happens! So, my daughter, if you are asking for the wrong things then how can you hope to receive happy tidings?

And who are you to protect your children? Even if you are alive, what protection can you offer your children? What is your strength? Just as Dhamma, potent and powerful, protects you, it also protects your children. Its power is incomparable. Even if the disease comes we are not worried. Whatever happens will happen for good. The law of nature is very delicate. Only understanding it with intellect does not help. Once it is understood it should be applied. How? When you know that the results of a happy event will be good, pleasant sensations will start. Similarly, if an unhappy event is to take place, then unpleasant sensations will be felt. If we are an established meditator, we will know that if unpleasant sensations are arising, then some unhappy event may be around the corner. If these sensations are observed with equanimity, then its power will weaken and it will bear a weakened result, like a flower, light and soft. On the other hand, if we become weak then the impending fruit may come and fall heavily like a sword. Strengthen the mind.

Work on the sensations with awareness and stop worrying. These sensations are connected to the very depths of the mind, which means that if our mind gets established in equanimity, then we are getting established in equanimity at the root level. The surface level of the mind is reactive and it is making us unhappy. But the other part is watching these very roots and helping us to come out of our miseries. This is the way out of misery.

It is a huge blessing that you are able to work at cleansing the mind at the root level. Without this the mind cannot be fully purified. After receiving this profound teaching of the Buddha which shows us the way out of fear, there can be no room for anxiety. Come out of it. Human beings tend to be weak. Leave your weakness and take refuge in Dhamma, the law of Nature. You can be strong with the power of Dhamma as you take refuge in it. Dhamma is very powerful. You are very much protected.

May you be happy and continue to grow in Dhamma! Be happy!

NO PATH IS PERFECTLY SMOOTH; CHALLENGES ALWAYS ARISE

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, December 2014

Japan's meteoric rise after the Second World War was based on an extraordinarily strong work ethic. But economic conditions worsened from the early 1990s, and often those who bore the brunt were young people who had finished their schooling and were looking to start a career. One of these was a young man, born in 1976, whom we'll call Yoshitaki. He had worked hard from the time he was in middle school, studied at university, got a degree in information technology and was hired by a large company based in Yokohama. Like many young employees, he lived in a company dormitory and regularly worked until 9 or 10 p.m. He often had to travel all over Japan, helping to solve customers' problems. It was a tiring and stressful job.



Yoshitaki's home was 310 miles away in Wakayama, so he had little chance to see his family. After seven years of this lonely existence, he fell into a depression. Fortunately, the company gave him two years' paid sick leave. Yoshitaki returned to Wakayama and started to think about his life. What had helped him in difficult times and what might help him now?

Both his parents faced pressure in their jobs. But they had discovered a type of meditation that involved observing the breath while walking. Yoshitaki began to practice this technique with them every evening for 30 to 40 minutes. It left him feeling more calm and balanced, but still looking for something more. Luckily, a friend told Yoshitaki about Vipassana meditation and he decided to join a course. Even after the first 10 days, he felt a big change. Now the question was how to bring this into his life. Yoshitaki did not want to go back to being a salaryman, consumed by his job. Instead he decided to start a small business, selling environment-friendly items over the Internet. This has left him free to continue meditating and to encourage others to meditate.

He has now sat four courses and served two. Yoshitaki says, "Goenkaji often describes the Dhamma path as a path from misery to happiness. That has really been my experience. Now I am very happy."

A GOOD SMALL TOWN GETS MUCH, MUCH BETTER

From the Vipassana International Newsletter, June 2014

Local students in Menomonie, Wisconsin, like to say of their meditation center, Dhamma Visuddhi, “The center found us.” In the previous 27 years, the region had hosted more than 40 non-center courses under the auspices of the Minnesota Vipassana Association. When a suitable site became available on reasonable terms, it was obvious that the time had come to take the next step. One day a meditator living in Menomonie happened upon it when she was out for a walk with a friend. The price was affordable, the negotiations went smoothly, and in 2013 the Association took possession of the property. The next 12 days were spent cleaning and organizing, and then the first 10-day course started, attended by more than 30 students.

Dhamma Visuddhi, which means “Purity of Dhamma,” is situated on 15 acres of forested property on bluffs overlooking the Red Cedar river. It is on the edge of the town of Menomonie, 60 miles east of the Twin Cities of Saint Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota. Menomonie has a population of 16,000 and is home to one of the campuses of the University of Wisconsin. The surrounding countryside has traditionally been an area for dairy farming and logging.

The main building of the center is a mansion completed in 1863. It was the summer home and later the permanent residence of a lumber baron named John Holly Knapp. On the grounds were huge vegetable gardens, apple orchards, grape arbors, a hennery, an ice house, horse barns and a greenhouse. The Knapp family lived here until the 1940s. In 1949 the property passed into the hands of the Episcopal Church, which used it for retreats and conferences. It also served as a children’s summer camp and a community center.

After the Vipassana Association took possession of the property it held an auction sale of the contents of the buildings, including a massive bell from the Civil War era, splendid Victorian furniture and an 1863 Steinway grand piano. Old students helped the auctioneers, and a food co-op sold coffee, scones and vegetarian lunch plates. The sale attracted around 200 visitors and netted \$38,500, which was applied to lower the principal of the mortgage. Today the mansion houses the center’s



kitchen and dining rooms, as well as men’s dorms. Two separate buildings hold the meditation hall and women’s dorm. In 2012, Smithsonian Magazine ranked Menomonie as one of the best small towns in the USA. Now it has something few other towns can boast: a Vipassana meditation center called Dhamma Visuddhi.