



# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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## WORDS OF DHAMMA

Tam nadihi vijānātha: sobbhesu padaresu ca, sanantā yanti kusobbhā, tunhīyanti mahodadhī.

Learn this from the waters: in mountain clefts and chasms, loud gush the streamlets, but great rivers flow silently.

*Sutta Nipāta 3.725*

## BE CLEAR ON THE BASIC IDEA OF VIPASSANA

*All assistant teachers answer questions posed by students. Here are excerpts of a Q&A that appeared in the December 2019 Northeast Vipassana Newsletter.*

Dear Assistant Teacher: I have a question regarding my Vipassana practice. While trying to concentrate on specific body parts, I sometimes have to mentally “draw some lines” or “create a boundary” for that area and then focus on that area. The very act of “drawing these lines” often results in activating the area and my feeling the sensations. I wonder if this is how I am supposed to scan my body or not. Can you please advise?

Dear Student: This is a good question because you realize that you are attempting to make the sensations more apparent. Goenkaji says the sensations are there all the time, but we lack the sharpness of mind to feel them. It's important not to come up with techniques or strategies to make the observation of sensations “easier” because this in fact means you are not observing reality “as it is,” which is the intent of Vipassana. There are many things we could add to make the technique “easier,”

such as using verbalization or, in your case, visualization. Many students ask about visualizing parts of the body. However, we always advise students to refrain from and ignore any visualizations and give more importance to the feeling of actual physical sensation, no matter how subtle or indistinct it may be. And, as soon as you feel something – anything – move on to the next part of the body.

The idea of Vipassana is not to experience strong, distinct sensations. Though from time to time this may happen, the idea is to learn to accept whatever sensations the mind can feel and observe in a given moment, understanding their changing nature while training the mind not to react to them, not wanting them to be anything else than exactly what they are in that moment in that part of the body. So don't fret about drawing lines. Just ignore the lines and don't cultivate this as a strategy. Instead, when you realize you are doing it, smilingly redirect your full attention to feeling whatever sensation you are able to be aware of in that moment. And if you don't feel a sensation in that area and you feel frustrated or disappointed by this, go back to a little Anapana (awareness of respiration at the entrance of the nostrils and below the nostrils above the upper lip, as it comes in and as it comes out). Then, when you've refocused your attention and the mind is calmer, go back to where you left off and start again with Vipassana.



## TOURING NORTH AMERICA, DELIVERING A MESSAGE OF TOLERANCE

*In 2002 S.N.Goenka and his wife, Mataji, visited meditators throughout Canada and the United States. This article about that tour first appeared in the International Vipassana Newsletter in September 2002.*

Goenkaji, Mataji, and three of their family members, after a brief stay in New York and Massachusetts, began a journey of more than 13,000 miles by road through the United States and Canada. They travelled through the lush green of the eastern spring; through the sweet-smelling early summer bloom of the South; through deserts; past towering mountains; over gently rolling plains that stretched to the horizon in all directions; into towns, villages and cities that seemed to go on forever. He joyfully spread the gift of Dhamma over all the land.



Goenkaji met with local Vipassana trusts across the continent, addressing their concerns and encouraging them in many cases to begin looking for centers. He looked at potential properties for several trusts. At one meeting he explained to trust members, “All of you are representatives of Dhamma. People will look at your lives to judge Vipassana. Two qualities are rare in human beings: selfless service and gratitude. Selfless service means helping others without expecting anything in return, without expecting money or name or fame. You are here to serve others. Sometimes, you may not expect money or name or fame but you wish for respect, or you develop arrogance. This is very harmful for you. A branch of a tree that bears fruit bows down due to the weight of the fruit. Similarly, a person who develops wisdom becomes more humble.”

A meeting between Goenkaji and Jean Chretien, the Prime Minister of Canada, was described as a meeting between a master of the art of politics and a master of the art of living a happy life. Goenkaji, who has been practicing Vipassana for more than 40 years, told Mr. Chretien, who has been a Member of Parliament for about 40 years, about Emperor Ashoka. Throughout his vast empire that spread from present day Afghanistan to the Bay of Bengal, Ashoka promoted the Dhamma with the practice of meditation (Vipassana). The many different sects present in his empire lived peacefully together then, just as the multicultural population in Canada does today.

Goenkaji met many business and public leaders throughout his tour. He told one group, “At one time kings had the most power and were the biggest influence on society. Now, politicians, administrators, and businesspeople have that position. Good and bad qualities percolate down from the top. Therefore it is very important that businesspeople live a moral and righteous life, for their own good and for the good of others.” Goenkaji visited the Museum of Tolerance in San Diego; not only because its theme is an issue for which he has worked tirelessly for more than 30 years, but also because he wanted to see for himself how museums use modern technology for educational purposes. Although Goenkaji and those accompanying him knew the gruesome details of the Holocaust, when they toured the museum they were again deeply touched by the immensity of this man-made tragedy. He said, “Tolerance is one of the paramis necessary to attain the final goal of full liberation. Tolerance is important to keep peace in human society – tolerance of different cultures, languages, faiths and ethnic backgrounds, as well as tolerance for the actions of others that one finds disturbing, and above all tolerance of views that are different from one’s own. Such tolerance comes naturally when there is love and compassion in the mind.”

## WE GROW SEPARATELY – AND TOGETHER

*This article first appeared in the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter in December 2017.*

Vipassana meditation is an introspective pursuit. That we meditators are inspired to work alone patiently peeling off layer after layer of a seemingly inexhaustible inner onion suggests a high degree of comfort with solitude. Despite this, Vipassana is also conducive to a sense of community, with the earliest example being the Buddha's first teaching to his five former meditation companions, starting rotation of the wheel of Dhamma and ultimately establishing a large sangha (community) of monks, nuns and householders.

During the opening formalities of any meditation course, S. N. Goenka asks us to "take refuge in sangha." By doing so, we take refuge in the quality of enlightenment developed by those who have advanced far along the path. Strictly speaking, this meaning of sangha refers to meditators who have reached at least the first stage of enlightenment. Our tradition of Vipassana may not constitute a sangha in this sense, but at the same time, many present-day meditators find their best community and "big family" through practicing Vipassana and getting involved in Dhamma service.

It is a testament to Goenkaji's wisdom in building a global Vipassana organization that he did not dwell on this point, and instead emphasized the primacy of individual practice and the utility of service to help the development of one's own Dhamma. Articles and talks in which he addresses community building per se are harder to come by. He instead encouraged his students not to depend on either a teacher or a formal community structure that could run the risk of becoming a sect or cult. He wanted his students fully integrated into the wider society, constantly striving to bring their own Dhamma practice into the world at large.

But the fact remains that as we develop, the natural desire to help others get the Dhamma inevitably leads to a sense of community. The profound experience of practicing Vipassana often leads to a deep feeling of commonality based on the shared understanding and world view that comes from it. Friendships and Dhamma partnerships naturally develop, and even with strangers who meditate together at a group sitting but never speak a word to each other, a certain warmth and familiarity often comes easily, as they find support from others in their own development. Goenkaji himself preferred to be referred to as a kalyana-mitta, or admirable friend, rather than a guru.

And while most of us are still in the "kindergarten of Vipassana" (or perhaps might have graduated from Vipassana's elementary school), the often-invisible fellowship that organically develops among meditators does serve a valuable function on the path. For example, Goenkaji emphasizes the fact that meditation centers develop more and more Dhamma vibrations over time, which foster people in their practice. Likewise, he strongly recommends regular group sittings as an aid to our practice. He also stresses the quality of sweetness in service, encouraging meditators to always serve harmoniously without ego.



In essence, while most serious Vipassana meditators do not constitute part of a sangha or formal community in the strict sense of these words, community naturally develops as we all move step by step in the right direction on the path together. Even though each individual must ultimately complete the journey alone, walking alongside others on the path can be an invaluable source of comfort and support.

May all be happy!

## BE GENTLE, BUT PERSISTENT

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*Teachers answer questions at every Vipassana course all around the world. Here are some questions and answers that first appeared in the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter in May 2018.*

Dear Assistant Teacher:

I sat a ten-day course recently and have kept up the daily routine since (although only once a day). Now when I begin, I lose my focus and usually just go back to my breath and focus on the edge of the opening of the nostrils. I sometimes go back to a body part, but it is not a systematic sweep. Should I continue to try to sweep or slowly focus on body parts or just do as I am and return to my breath?

Dear Student:

Great that you are making an effort to maintain your meditation practice. Keep in mind, Goenkaji tells us that sitting for two hours per day is important in order to receive the full benefits of this technique. It is fine to spend a few minutes (or longer) with anapana at the beginning of your meditation or, as needed, during your hour sitting. But don't get stuck on working only with the breath. Try to return to practicing Vipassana as soon as possible, as this is the practice that cleans the mind at the depth. A good gauge to know if the mind is fit to work with sensations is when you start feeling sensation below the nostrils, above the upper lip.

If you are not able to feel sensations when you sweep the attention through the entire body then work more part by part. You may spend a minute or so on these areas, with equanimity, without any craving or aversion towards this blank area. You can try to work with bigger chunks (like the whole head, the whole upper chest, the whole arm) to feel any sensation anywhere in this larger area. Then move to another large part. Next round you can try feeling something in smaller pieces. You can also try moving the attention more quickly through each part.



Whichever way you work it is important to work systematically from top to bottom and bottom to top. No part should be ignored for any reason. Training the mind to remain balanced in all situations while meditating helps to purify the mind at a deep level. This equanimity will expand to help you in your daily life.

Dear Assistant Teacher:

Over the last month or so while practicing Vipassana, when I become aware of an area often the sensations become more gross/intense. When I pass to the next area they fade away and may repeat in the new area. Subsequently, after the practice these muscles are often tight and I may have a headache. I know I can become aware of just the sensation and be equanimous, but I would be grateful for any comments.

Dear Student:

You are correct that your job is to observe the sensations and try to maintain equanimity. If you have tension within, then it is bound to arise when you meditate. This is natural. That said, sometimes it is helpful to work in a more relaxed way when your equanimity is challenged. Remember that your daily sittings do not need to be sittings of “strong determination”; in other words, you are free to change your position during the sitting. Another thing you can try when tension builds up is to focus your attention on your extremities, feeling sensations and understanding the changing nature of them there. Approach each meditation session with no expectations of perceived patterns. You will find that they also are anicca (impermanent) and will change as you continue practicing. When Goenkaji introduces Vipassana, he calls it a “very delicate” undertaking. It requires gentle, persistent effort in developing both awareness and equanimity with every experience.