

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF BUDDHA

Anabhijjhālu vihareyya, abyāpanna cetasā.
Sato ekaggacittassa, ajjhataṃ susamāhito.

Live without covetous greed, fill your mind with benevolence.
Be mindful and one-pointed, inwardly stable and concentrated.

Anguttara Nikāya 4.29

GRATEFUL STUDENT WRITES A LETTER

This article first appeared in the August 2020 newsletter of the Vipassana center in Jessup, Georgia. It is written by an old student who wanted to express his appreciation for Vipassana meditation. In our troubled world, he says, it feels good to remember that Vipassana can be practiced by anyone, anywhere.

At Vipassana centers, anyone can take as many courses as they want as long as they're able to abide by very simple rules: stay quiet, disturb no one, and stay in the meditation hall during mandatory daily sessions without sleeping.

There is no cost. No one is excluded. There is no way to pay for better accommodations, better teachers, or better treatment. There is no class system. A billionaire stays in the same room, sleeps in the same bed, and eats the same food as you and I do.

There is no way to fast track in and no shortcut to finish. There is no competition. No first place. No loser.

Everyone is equally welcome regardless of race, religion, gender, age, physical appearance, bank account, and connections. I can't claim that we always follow it, but we are taught to give nonjudgmental love and compassion to 100% of the population.

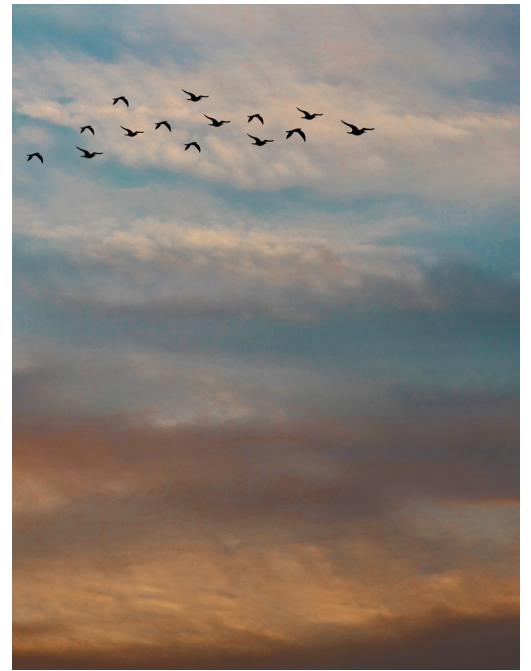
The teachers are not paid even though they've trained for years. They rarely talk and when they do they don't talk about themselves. The buildings are not named for donors or teachers or anyone, including the founder.

The managers and servers volunteer their time and energy. They are former students helping to provide the same peaceful setting they have received on their courses. In between courses, some former students give more time and energy to work on projects at the centers.

We don't find this way of life in the rest of the "real world," yet Vipassana centers continue to flourish without sponsorship or marketing of any kind. There are about 200 full-time centers in close to 100 countries.

It can be overwhelming to think of the unfairness of life, the complexity of its problems, and the ignorance, irrationality, and selfishness of human beings, myself included. But it helps to remember Vipassana centres – places that make sense.

I feel slightly better about our world when, in the middle of some trouble, I remember that Vipassana centers are not fairy tales. They do exist. And what they ultimately offer – Vipassana meditation – can be practiced by anyone, anywhere.



HOW TO DEVELOP THE BEST QUALITIES WITHIN YOU

The following Q&As first appeared in the Northeast Vipassana Newsletter. The first few students' questions are answered by teachers trained in this tradition; the last two are answered by S.N. Goenka. These first appeared in December 2017 and May 2018.

STUDENT

I am writing for clarification concerning taking refuge in the Triple Gem. What exactly do Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha refer to?

ASSISTANT TEACHER

S.N. Goenka is very clear, during the opening formalities of the course, that the practice of taking refuge in the triple gem is not a conversion to an organized religion. Rather, one is taking refuge in the qualities of these three things. Buddha refers to a historical person (Siddhartha Gotama), but also to all other previous, future, or present Buddhas. Goenka emphasizes we are not taking refuge in any person, but rather the quality of enlightenment that the Buddha embodied. We all have the seed of enlightenment within us; now we need to develop it.

Dhamma refers to the non-sectarian path consisting of sila (morality), samadhi (concentration of the mind, using the non-sectarian object of our own breath); and panna (wisdom, which is pure observation of the truth within us). In our tradition, sangha refers to any person who has made substantial progress on the path, having realized at least the first stage of enlightenment. In the Buddha's time many of the monks were in that group and were collectively referred to as the "sangha". Other traditions consider a community of meditators a sangha and we often hear the term used in the media. A practical way of approaching this concept, that some Vipassana meditators find helpful, is to take inspiration from being around people who are more advanced on the path. We take strength from each other as we all strive for enlightenment. We are not taking refuge in any person, but in their good qualities: they have been diligently working to develop themselves and to overcome their impurities. We take inspiration from the example they have set and resolve to work in a similar way.

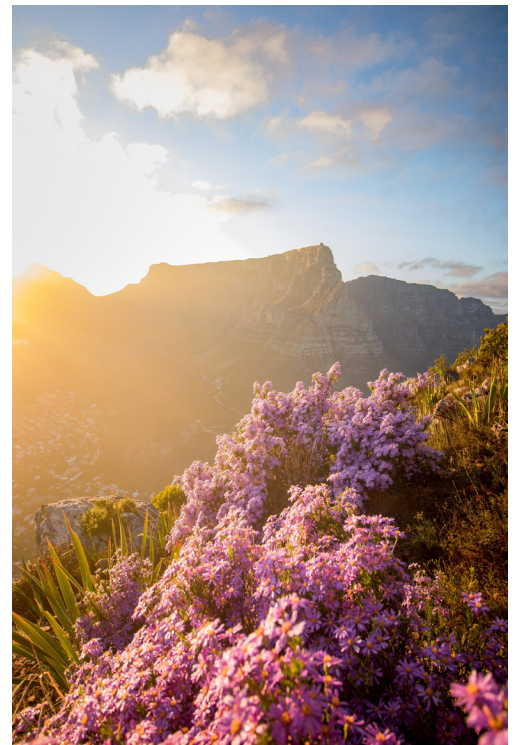
STUDENT

I have been having a bit of trouble with my practice as of late. It feels as if it is becoming rigid at times. During the body scan how small of an area should I focus on? As in, should I scan every part of the face separately or the entire face at once? I usually scan small areas and go down each side of the head and neck separately and I am wondering if I am going too slow and focusing on too small an area.

ASSISTANT TEACHER

You definitely do not want the practice of scanning the body to become rote or rigid. Remember what it is you are trying to do when you meditate: you are trying to feel sensations and understand their characteristic of anicca (change), thereby becoming equanimous with whatever situation is arising. It is important to work systematically through the body from top to bottom and bottom to top. The reason for this is that you want to make sure that you do not miss any part of the body. But you can move your attention in different ways according to the type of sensation you are feeling at any given time.

For instance, if you are feeling more of a uniform, subtle, pleasant sensation everywhere then you will be able to sweep the attention through most or many parts of the body simultaneously. At other times when there are many different types of sensations or even blind areas then you can move the attention part by part. Sometimes you can take bigger chunks (like the whole head, the whole arm) or sometimes move quickly when moving part by part. It is good to change the speeds with which you work





so it doesn't become a boring mechanical process. Remember that the measurement of your progress is not the type of sensations you are feeling. The only measurement of progress is your equanimity with whatever sensation that arises.

If you find that your mind keeps wandering, use anapana (awareness of respiration) to strengthen your concentration as and when you need. You can also use anapana to help you when you get stuck moving the attention through the body: observe sensations as you move the attention down the body from head to feet with your exhalations, and observe sensations as you move the attention up the body from feet to head with your inhalations. Ultimately your capacity to observe sensations throughout the body will improve and become less mechanical. The main thing is not to miss any areas of the body and to keep understanding the changing nature of each sensation.

STUDENT

My mind still remains immersed in lust, as a result of which the continuity of practice is not maintained. Kindly suggest a way out.

GOENKA

Fight out your battle. Whenever lust arises in the mind, don't get involved in the object of the lust. Just accept the fact: lust as lust. "At this moment my mind is full of lust." Accept this, and see what sensation you have. At that moment whatever sensation you are feeling predominantly anywhere in the body, start observing it, understanding anicca, anicca, this is not permanent, this is not permanent. This lust that has come is also not permanent, let me see how long it lasts. If you do this, the lust becomes weaker and weaker and passes away.

STUDENT

Lack of willpower and laziness are obstructing my meditation. Could you kindly give me some advice.

GOENKA

Develop willpower, strong willpower. If you are so weak that you keep on breaking your decision to meditate every day in the morning and evening, then decide that you won't take your breakfast without having sat for one hour. How many days will you miss your breakfast? You will start practicing daily. And so far as laziness or drowsiness is concerned, just examine yourself. If the laziness is because of lack of sleep, then sleep for some time. Get refreshed. But if you find this laziness is because of your mental impurity, which has become a barrier for you, then fight it out. Have hard breathing for some time, sprinkle some cold water on the eyes, stand up, walk. Somehow or the other, get rid of laziness.

DISCOVERING THE ULTIMATE ACT OF COURAGE

These three poems are from the collection “The Moon Appears When the Water is Still – Reflections of the Dhamma,” by Ian McCrorie. The book was published by Pariyatti Press of Seattle in 2003.

Anger

When I am angry I go fishing to hook
he who has angered me.
But my angry mind has already caught me.
My agitated mind indicates
that I am truly the first victim of my anger.
When I feel a tug on my line
I think, “Now I’ve got him!”
But it’s only me I have hooked.
Anger is like holding a two-edged sword
by the blade and lashing out with the handle.
I am the only one bleeding.

Courage

I prefer the word “sitting” to “meditating.”
Meditating may be seen as another thing we do,
an activity, a practice, an engagement.
It might be a hobby or a game.
Sitting is non-active, it is a non-practice.
It is accepting, open, observant,
free from judgment.
It is an occasion to be mindful of the reality,
within and without us and to be at peace with that reality.
It is the ultimate act of courage: to not run away.
We do not seek escape.
We sit.

The Broken Finger

The problem of our human condition
is like that of a man with a broken finger
who experiences pain everywhere he touches.
Everywhere we touch we feel the pain
of sickness, of sorrow, of old age and death;
the pain of separation from loved ones;
the pain of unrequited expectations.
From these we cannot escape.
From these we need not escape.
We need only to fix the broken finger.
So place it in a splint of Dhamma,
Soothe it with the balm of concentration
And wrap it with the bandage of kindness.

