



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XXXIX • JUNE 2022

WORDS OF BUDDHA

Yathā agāram ducchannam vutthī samativijjhati, evam abhāvitam cittam rāgo samativijjhati.

Just as rain breaks through an ill-thatched house, so passion penetrates an undeveloped mind.

Dhammapada 1.13

WORKING TO HAVE A HEALTHY MIND IS NOT SELFISH

This article appears in “The Art of Living, as taught by S.N. Goenka,” by William Hart (Pariyatti Publishing, Seattle). In it, Mr. Goenka is answering questions from students.



Q: Isn't it selfish to forget the world and just to sit and meditate all day?

A: It would be if this were an end in itself, but it is a means to an end that is not at all selfish: a healthy mind. When your body is sick, you enter a hospital to recover health. You don't go there for your whole life, but simply to regain health, which you will then use in ordinary life. In the same way you meditate to recover mental health, which you will then use in ordinary life for your good and for the good of others.

Q: If we keep observing ourselves, how can we live life in any natural way? We'll be so busy watching ourselves that we can't act freely or spontaneously.

A: This is not what people find after completing a meditation course. Here you learn a mental training that will give you the ability to observe yourself in daily life whenever you need to do so. Not that you will keep practicing with closed eyes all day throughout your life. But just as the strength you gain by physical exercise helps you in daily life, so this mental exercise will also strengthen you. What you call “free, spontaneous action” is really blind reaction, which is always harmful. By learning to observe yourself, you will find that whenever a difficult situation arises in life, you can keep the balance of your mind. With that balance you can choose freely how to act. You will take real action, which is always positive, always beneficial for you and for all others.

Then another reality becomes clear. Any effort to hold onto something, saying, “This is I, this is me, this is mine,” makes one unhappy, because sooner or later this something to which one clings passes away, or else this “I” passes away. Attachment to what is in permanent, transitory, illusory, and beyond one's control causes suffering. We understand all this not because someone tells us it is so, but because we experience it within, by observing sensations within the body.

Then how is one to not make oneself unhappy? How is one to live without suffering? By simply observing without reacting. Instead of trying to keep one experience and to avoid another; to pull this close, to push that away; one simply examines objectively, with equanimity, with a balanced mind.

WHY ARE WEALTHY PEOPLE SO OFTEN UNHAPPY?

Every year, in Davos, Switzerland, there is a major meeting of businesspeople, economists, academics, and political leaders from around the world. In 2000, S.N. Goenka was invited to address these people as a guest speaker. The following is adapted from his address "Is This All There Is? The Meaning of Happiness" to the World Economic Forum on January 31, 2000. It appears in the book "Chronicles of Dhamma – Selected Articles from the Vipassana Newsletter."

Every person who is attending this Forum is among a unique group of people on our planet. They are generally among the wealthiest, most powerful, most accomplished individuals in the world. Even being invited to attend the World Economic Forum is recognition of the eminent status that each participant has reached among his or her peers.

When someone has all the wealth, power and status that anyone could ever want, are they necessarily happy? Or all these accomplishments and the self-satisfaction they bring "all there is"? Or is there some greater degree of happiness which it is possible to achieve?

Happiness is in an ephemeral condition. It is rapidly fleeting; here one moment and gone the next. One day when all is going well with your business, your bank account and your family, there is happiness. But what happens when something unwanted happens? When something entirely out of your control happens to disturb your happiness and harmony?

Every person in the world, regardless of their power and position, will experience periods during which circumstances arise that are out of their control and not to their liking. It may be the discovery that you have a fatal disease; it may be the illness or death of a near and dear one; it may be a divorce or the discovery that a spouse is cheating on you. Regardless of how much wealth, prestige and power you may have, such unwanted events generally create great misery.

Next comes the question: how to deal with these periods of unhappiness? Such periods are bound to come in even the most charmed life. Do you behave in a balance and equanimous manner, or do you react with aversion towards the misery that you are experiencing? Do you crave for the return of your happiness? When you become addicted to happiness and to everything always going the way you want, the misery when things do not go your way becomes greater. In fact, it becomes unbearable. It often makes us resort to alcohol to cope with the situation of disappointment and depression, and to take sleeping pills to obtain the rest we need to keep going.

I come from a business family and was an entrepreneur and businessman from a very early age. I built sugar mills, weaving mills and blanket factories and established import-export firms with offices all over the world. In the process, I made a lot of money. However, I also vividly remember how I reacted to events in my business and personal life during those years. Every night, if I had failed to be successful in a business transaction during the day, I would lie awake for hours and try to figure out what had gone wrong and what I should do the next time. If I had accomplished a great success that day I would lie awake and relish my accomplishment. While I experienced success, there was neither happiness nor peace of mind. I found that peace was very closely related to happiness and I frequently had neither, regardless of my money.

I remember a favourite poem of mine related to the subject. It is easy enough to be pleasant / when life flows along like a sweet song. / But the man worthwhile / is the one who can smile / when everything goes dead wrong. How each of us copes with these periods of things going "dead wrong" is a major component of the meaning of happiness, regardless of our money, power and prestige.

Everyone wants to live a happy life. For this, one has to experience real happiness. The so-called happiness that one experiences by having money, power, and by indulging in sensual pleasures is not real happiness. It is very fragile, unstable and fleeting. For real happiness, for lasting stable happiness, one has to make a journey deep within oneself and get rid of all the unhappiness stored in the deeper levels of the mind. As long as there is misery at the depths of the mind, all attempts to feel happy at the surface level of mind prove futile.

This stock of unhappiness at the depth of the mind keeps on multiplying as long as one keeps generating negativities such as anger, hatred, ill will, and animosity. The law of nature is such that as soon as one generates negativity, unhappiness arises simultaneously. It is impossible to feel happy and peaceful when one is generating negativity in the mind. Peace and negativities cannot coexist, just as light and darkness cannot coexist. There is a systematic scientific exercise developed by a great super-scientist of my ancient country by which one can explore the truth pertaining to the mind-body phenomenon at the experiential level. This technique is called Vipassana, which means observing the reality objectively, as it is. The technique helps one to develop the faculty of feeling and understanding the interaction of mind and matter within one's own physical structure.

The technique of Vipassana involves the basic law of nature that whenever any defilement arises in the mind, simultaneously two things start happening at the physical level. One is that the breath loses its normal rhythm. I start breathing hard whenever any negativity arises in the mind. This is an apparent reality that everyone can experience. At the same time, at a subtler level, a biochemical reaction starts within the body: I experience a physical sensation on the body. Every defilement generates some sensation or the other in some part of the body.

This is a practical solution. An ordinary person cannot observe abstract defilements of the mind: abstract fear, anger or passion. But with proper training and practice, it is very easy to observe respiration and sensations, both of which are directly related to the mental defilements. This mental-physical phenomenon is like a coin with two sides. On the one side are the thoughts or emotions that arise in the mind. On the other side are the respiration and sensations in the body. Every thought or emotion, conscious or unconscious, every mental defilement manifests in the breath and sensation of that moment.

Thus, by observing the respiration or sensation, one is indirectly observing the mental defilement. Instead of running away from the problem, you are facing reality as it is. Then you find that the defilement loses its strength; it can no longer overpower you as it did in the past. If you persist, the defilement eventually disappears altogether – and you remain peaceful and happy.



ONE RING HAS VALUE. THE OTHER HAS A HOLE AT ITS CENTER.

This famous story, The Two Rings, is one S.N. Goenka especially enjoyed telling to students. It is included in the book "The Art of Living – Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka", by William Hart. The book is published by Pariyatti.

A rich old man died, leaving two sons. For some time, the two continued living together in the traditional Indian way, in a single joint household, a joint family. Then they quarrelled and decided to separate, dividing all the property between them. Everything was divided fifty-fifty, and thus they settled their affairs.

But after the settlement had been made, a small packet was discovered which had been cleverly hidden by their father. They opened the packet and found two rings inside, one set with a valuable diamond, and the other an ordinary silver ring worth only a few rupees.

Seeing the diamond, the elder brother developed greed in his mind, and he started explaining to the younger one, "To me it appears that this ring is not the earning of our father, but rather an heirloom from his forefathers. That is why he kept it separate from his other possessions. And since it has been kept for generations in our family, it should remain for future generations. Therefore I, being elder, shall keep it. You had better take the silver ring."

The younger brother smiled and said, "All right, be happy with the diamond ring. I'll be happy with the silver one." Both of them placed their rings on their fingers and went their ways.

The younger brother thought to himself, "It is easily understandable that my father kept the diamond ring; it is so valuable. But why did he keep this ordinary silver ring?" He examined the ring closely and found some words engraved on it: This will also change. "Oh," he said, "this is the mantra of my father: 'This will also change!'" He replaced the ring on his finger.

Both brothers faced all the ups and downs of life. When spring came, the elder brother became highly elated, losing the balance of his mind. When autumn or winter came, he fell into deep depression, again losing his mental balance. He became tense, developing hypertension. Unable to sleep at night, he started using sleeping pills, tranquilizers, stronger drugs.

This was the brother with the diamond ring.

As for the younger brother with the silver ring, when spring came, he enjoyed it; he didn't try to run away from it. He enjoyed it, but looked at his ring and remembered, "This will also change." And when it changed, he could smile and say, "Well, I knew it was going to change. It has changed, so what!" When autumn or winter came, again he looked at his ring and remembered, "This will also change." He didn't start crying, knowing that this would also change. And yes, it also changed, it passed away.

Through all the ups and downs, all the vicissitudes of life, he knew that nothing is eternal. He did not lose the balance of his mind and he lived a peaceful, happy life.

This was the brother with the silver ring.

