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WORDS OF BUDDHA

Diso disam yam tam kayirā, verī vā pana verinam; micchāpanihitam cittam pāpiyo nam tato kare.

Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy, or a foe to a foe, the ill-directed mind can do to you even worse.

Udana 4.33

FIRST BLACK HERITAGE COURSE IN THE U.S.

This article first appeared in the Vipassana International Newsletter in April 2022.



On January 3, 2010, the first worldwide African Heritage Course concluded in India at Dhamma Pattana, the meditation center next to the Global Pagoda outside Mumbai, India. Vipassana teacher S.N Goenka strongly welcomed this initiative because, in his words, “White, black or brown, a human being is a human being.” His wish was for people of every background to experience liberation from suffering. In August 2010, Dhamma Dipa in the U.K. held another African Heritage Course.

These two courses planted seeds that took a long time to germinate. But more than a

decade later, in September 2021, Dhamma Dhara in Massachusetts hosted its first course specifically for the Black community, along with some others wanting to meditate then. The center had previously hosted courses for people of Indian, Burmese, Vietnamese or Cambodian background, so there was a well-established model for the course.

In a time of strict COVID-19 restrictions, 65 people of color participated in the course, most of them African Americans. Black teachers, Black servers and Black meditators all worked together, with the compassionate, dedicated Dhamma Dhara staff offering valuable support. These men and women shared a common heritage, a common experience of suffering and a common solution: the ancient teaching of liberation. They were part of a growing community responding to the message of hope and freedom, making the path to liberation their own.

Returning to their homes after the course, they had the opportunity to share their experiences and the path of Dhamma. Many participants spoke of a special atmosphere during the course, both solemn and joyful. One woman expressed her gratitude and relief at finally sitting a course where she didn't feel so alone. Instead, it was a comfort to be surrounded by people like herself, who could understand her and shared her life experience, and who responded in a way that was familiar to her. Another meditator found that observing the sensations as anicca helped in dealing with a past trauma. The success of this course has encouraged other centers in the U.S. to take the same direction. Now Dhamma Kunja, in Washington state, has announced a 10-day Black Heritage Course starting on September 14, 2022. After all, Dhamma is for all.



OPEN THE DOOR TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE

The following are excerpts from a 2021 old student talk called “The Power of Small Changes – Establishing a Daily Vipassana Practice,” by Massachusetts Vipassana teachers Paul and Susan Fleischman. This article considers the challenges and triumphs of meditating in daily life.

Many old students find that meditating two hours a day, for an hour each time, and keeping sila (that is, morality) is easy, natural, and a great blessing in their lives. But many others find that becoming established as a meditator



in these ways is difficult, burdensome, or impossible. Let's look for the attitudes, practices, and ways of doing things that make meditation a natural extension of daily life that many students can follow. The first and most important trick is to meditate without negativity towards yourself or your meditation practice. The point of Vipassana is to walk toward nibbana, which means a heart like the Buddha's: without guilt, self-criticism, or feelings of inferiority. When your thoughts are negative, they won't help you get established as a meditator. Don't criticize yourself when you fall short of goals or when you face difficulties.

If meditation leads you to judge yourself, to feel you are failing, to feel that you are not meeting the standards that you think are required, then your meditation will become a source of self-criticism and dissatisfaction. People always continue those things that make them feel good about themselves, and eventually discard practices and behaviors that make them feel inferior or second-rate.

Give yourself credit for whatever you do. In the context of the twenty-first century, there is little social or cultural support for meditating. Everything you do to live the meditator's life is an accomplishment. Even if you imagine that you are too busy to sit

two full hours a day, still, don't criticize yourself for sitting just once a day, or even your occasional practice. Instead, notice that even under the pressures of your time-conscious life, you still have managed to stay loyal to the path. In the midst of the hurricane you are walking forward steadily, keeping your eye on the polestar.

We can aim to be like a tree in the woods that has roots deep in the ground. On the surface the tree looks unstable, bending to the forces around it. But in its depths, the tree remains rooted.

A good reason to try to never miss twice daily meditation is that when you least want to sit it might be most beneficial to do so. Sitting right then may help you add Dhamma wisdom into a problem that you might otherwise have avoided. If you systematically overrule your resistances to meditating, those barriers may diminish and your meditation may facilitate increasingly skilful life choices and become more deeply valued.

Choose to sit when you are not exhausted, hungry or tired. Don't make it a forced march. Ernest Hemingway advised aspiring writers to write every single day at their best time of day. Choose your meditation to be your best time of day, twice a day, every day. Your meditation practice will gain forward momentum if it feels valuable to you every time you sit. Treasure the timing of your meditation to optimize its benefits.

The theologian Paul Tillich taught that the most important feature of the spiritual life is to clarify and highlight a person's "ultimate concern," whatever it is that you find most important. On a beach in Florida I once saw a T-shirt that said, "I love you, but I have chosen rock and roll instead." What have you chosen as your first principle?

Sometimes, during a Vipassana course, we understand what we value the most, and the dam opens, or the seesaw tilts, and we move into a new territory. But sometimes, life-changing choices come to fruition in a conventional moment. You say goodbye to one phase of life, letting go of its attachments, and you open the door to a new way of life.

The tipping point may come when you relinquish or moderate old habits, compulsions, and subtle consumer attachments, like television, Internet, social media, etc. Although the tipping point often comes from opening a door, it also sometimes appears when you slam a door. Meditation is for strong individuals who know how to say “no” to distractions.

When your obstacles are too great, and your meditation is not strong enough, accept your current reality as it is. Honor your loyalty and your confidence that in the future you will grow. Just as we are taught to refrain from criticizing or demeaning other people, we should treat ourselves, and the meditation practice that we actually have, with respect.

Our teaching is to be devoted and diligent, but not mechanical, rigid. Don't force yourself to do anything that you interpret to be harmful to your well-being. We are not practising “be here now.” We are following the teaching “this is suffering, and this is the way out of suffering.” We have a direction. Don't you find it wonderful that a temporary collection of atoms and energy, like us, has learned to meditate, feeling peace and harmony (sometimes if not always)? There must be some scientific laws, some principles, some Dhamma in the universe that is manifesting in us.

Avoid turning your meditation into a competition with yourself or against others. At the moment of your death, you will not be graded by a teacher, and you will not be rated for your location in a hierarchy. Abandon your achievement-oriented drive to get to any special stage.

Make sila (that is, morality) positive, not negative. Think of it as adding, not deleting. Proper sila is not deprivation, doing without something. Sila is adding a necessary good ingredient.

The historian of science, Dr. Janet Brown, concluded her two-volume biography of Charles Darwin by saying that the most important contribution of this great scientist was to emphasize the power of small changes... Our meditation practice is for ordinary people, like all of us, and it is based upon the power of accumulating small changes.



TEACHER SOUGHT TO HELP OTHERS, ONE STUDENT AT A TIME

This article *appeared* in the Vipassana International Newsletter in April 2022.

When Bhimshi Savla came for his first Vipassana course, he was a slim, youthful-looking man with thick, dark hair. In fact he was in his 40s, and had already achieved much to be proud of in his life. Long before it became common for people from India to study in Western countries, he had trained in both the United States and the UK.

After returning to India, he built up a thriving medical practice. He and his wife Pushpa also had a growing family. At the same time, he had always been interested in spiritual development. He had tried various techniques, but none satisfied him. In 1972, however, his life came to a turning point when he made his way to a pilgrims' guesthouse in Mumbai to attend his first 10-day course. Later, he recalled the very basic living conditions, the constant noise from the street and neighboring buildings, and the participants' tendency to engage in philosophical discussions during break periods. In those days, talking was permitted outside meditation hours, but Dr. Savla preferred to remain silent and keep working.

After that course, Dr. Savla gave up the various social service activities in which he had been involved. Vipassana became the heart of his life. He continued meditating and gradually brought all the members of his family to courses. On one occasion, he stayed in one of the original mud huts together with his younger son, then aged 8.

In late 1981, when S.N. Goenka decided to appoint the first assistant teachers, naturally he thought of Dr. Savla. Many meditators remember his emphasis on effort and strong determination. But he knew that some students needed to hear a different message. On one course, he noticed that a relatively new student was having a hard time during the morning session. She had decided to sit without moving for the entire three hours, and physically she was able to do that. But mentally, instead of just observing without reacting, she was trying strenuously to achieve something. When the bell rang at 11 a.m., Dr. Savla called the student to the front and said, "You know, you can't force anything to happen." His words helped the student recognize that sitting without moving is a game of the ego if awareness and equanimity are lacking. That realization was a huge relief for the student, who could now start to work with a better understanding.

On another course there was an elderly woman who had difficulty walking. Despite this, after every group sitting she went up to the front to talk with Dr. Savla and ask him the same questions over and over. Each time she repeated herself, but that never bothered Dr. Savla. He beamed at the woman, listened attentively and gave her encouragement.

Dr. Savla led courses in many parts of the world, including the first courses in Kenya (1985), Panama (1991) and Bahrain (1999). Despite a heart ailment, he was always eager to serve, and he didn't care how many students were signed up or how rough the conditions were.

Even in his last days in hospital, he taught the nurses Anapana.

In the words of his dear life companion Pushpa, "He may have left us physically but he will always be by our side." Bhimshi Savla passed away on January 2, 2022, at the age of 93.

