

# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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## WORDS OF BUDDHA

Na tam mātā pitā kayirā aññe vāpi ca ñātakā sammāpanihitam cittam seyyaso nam tato kare.

No mother nor father nor any other kin can do greater good for oneself than a mind directed well.

*Dhammapada 3.43*

## A WANDERING MIND? AGING? MEDITATION CAN HELP

*Here, from the newsletter of the California Vipassana Center, are some questions asked by students, along with teachers' responses. These appeared in the newsletter in January and July 2021.*

**Student:** My attention often wavers during Vipassana practice, and it is difficult to keep my mind on physical sensations. I don't want to judge myself for a wandering mind, but I want to gently bring it back to the present moment. How do I sustain non-judgmental awareness?

**Teacher:** The habit pattern of the mind is to wander, and you are retraining it. It takes time. Through your gentle practice of bringing the mind back when you become aware of its wanderings, you are practising with right effort. This brings the best fruits. But wanting the judgment to be gone is a form of craving, i.e. wanting something to be different than it is. When you realize you are judging or the mind is wandering, just accept it. This is the reality of the moment. No worries. Just bring



it back to the sensation where you were in the body. Again, if the mind wanders or becomes judgmental: just accept this, and again bring the attention back to sensations on the body. When the mind is unruly or distracted you can use Anapana for a few minutes, and then go back to Vipassana.

**Student:** I am having problems with sitting straight. My shoulders and spine seem to be heavier than before. Maybe I'm aging? It seems I can't sit long any more: only 5 to 10 minutes and I feel stiffness in my back and shoulder. A few years ago, I was able to sit for at least an hour.

**Teacher:** Firstly, just a reminder that you should not try to hold your posture for one hour during your daily sittings if you have pain. That sitting of strong determination is reserved for the three one-hour sittings a day during the Vipassana period (day 4 to day 10) of a meditation course. So shift as you need, if the pain becomes too strong. Have you tried leaning against the wall, or sitting in a chair during your daily meditation? There's nothing wrong with trying that. If you find you are more comfortable, then that's great.

In any case, when discomfort arises try to keep working with it with your Vipassana practice. Move your attention throughout the body and when you come to these places of discomfort – observe them just like any other sensation. Don't jump to them out of order. Just observe them with the understanding of annica, and with as much acceptance and equanimity as you can. As for aging – sure you're aging, as we all are. It is not particularly helpful to use this as a reason to give up or feel discouraged. As we get older, lots of discomforts manifest in many different ways. Vipassana helps us work with these discomforts, with the wisdom of impermanence and the opportunity to develop equanimity with them.

## THE POINT IS TO NOT SUFFER

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*This is an excerpt from an old student talk by Massachusetts Vipassana teacher Paul Fleischman. It was presented in Cupertino, California in October 2019.*

The main point I wish to make is that any steps you're taking on the path will help you. You may be an established meditator, you may be faltering, you may be half one and half the other. All the steps you take will help you and continue to move you forward. So I want you to feel that this talk is optimistic and inspirational.

In supermarkets these days are magazines with these kinds of headlines: 'mindfulness', 'meditation', 'happiness', 'bliss'. A constant stream of information proports to be about meditation and other kinds of practices. But it's not helpful to a student who wants to walk the path as we do. It may even be distracting. Every human being has some significant burden of negativities inside their mind and body. We all feel some depression, anxiety and frustration. We all feel troubled by the state of the world, troubled by issues in our own health and our own families.

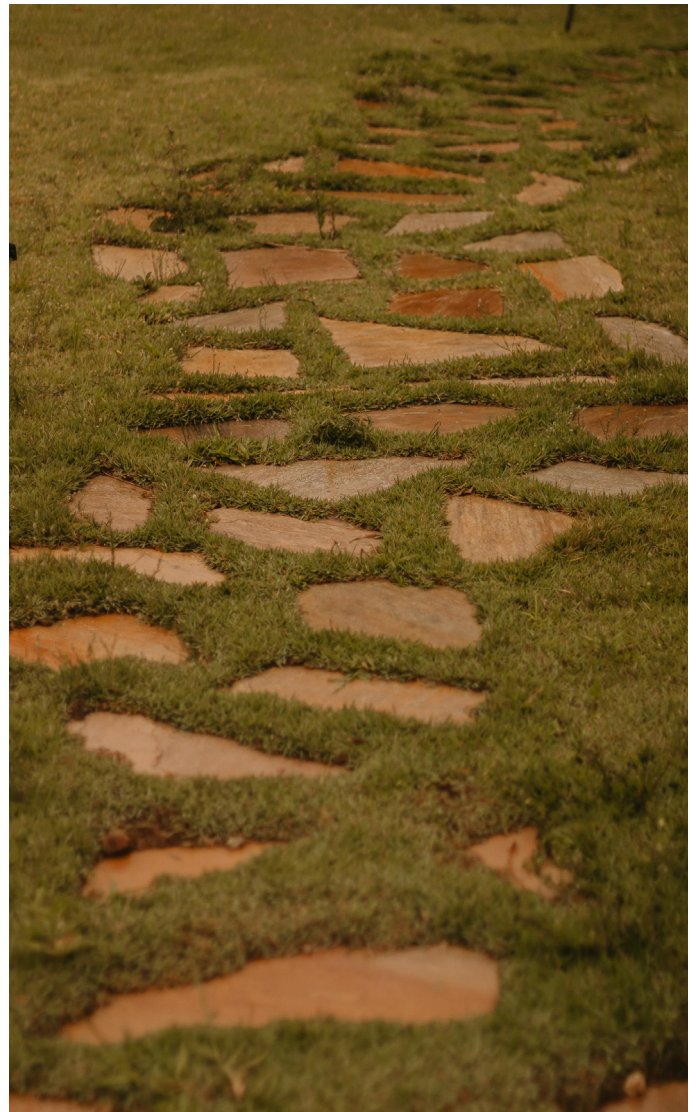
Your progress is not measured by the ease of your meditation, or by the pleasure you experience when you meditate. So if there's a meditation that makes you happy in one book or in one magazine, it must make you awfully dull. But if you want a meditation that will help you confront the realities in which we actually live, then you need a complex, deep, thorough investigation of the human condition as it exists within you. That's the only way your meditation will help you confront the realities that we ask it to help us with.

Still, we could say we don't have such an easy path, and you want to ask yourself: why are you on such a long, uphill path? Does it make sense? When we sit down to meditate it isn't always like the supermarket magazines that promise instant well-being. Instead, we find ourselves walking a lifelong path that contains our full, head-on awareness of the difficulties that are inside of us. Sometimes it's tempting to feel frustrated or overwhelmed or even defeated. So a very important part of the life of a meditator, possibly the most important part, is the determination to continue the path.

Our teacher, S.N. Goenka, has emphasized to us a concept and he uses the word 'purity'. Many people find the word 'purity' unpalatable in American English, so I'd like to change that word to 'fidelity' – we practice with fidelity. That is to say, it's somewhat like getting married. You don't say that your spouse is better than any other spouse, you don't compare your spouse to other people's spouses, you don't say you have the only good one. But you do say this is the one you're going to stick with.

Along with our rational, experiential pursuit of truth we also need an emotional pursuit of truth. By which we ask simply: 'does this suit me? Is this right for me?' A personal, emotional basis for understanding. We could call this resonance. Does this path resonate with me?

One way to say who we are is that we're a bunch of desperados. When I gave this talk in New York, I looked around and saw all these people who'd come, all these people who had braved the New York subway system to get to the talk, and I thought: 'my God you must be desperate!'





(Laughter). If you don't have a bit of desperation you wouldn't be here. That's the honest answer to who we are and why we are the way we are. We're people who are aware of our suffering. We don't want to stay in that condition and we're desperate to get out of it. The Buddha said that the single most important virtue is the virtue of diligence. And desperation is part of our diligence that the Buddha recommended to us.

A very important and beautiful position that Goenka took was that we're students of the Buddha but we're not Buddhists. If he hadn't made that particular phrasing available to me, I don't think I'd be here today. So Goenka's phrasing, that we're following the Buddha, puts us in a historical trajectory but doesn't bind us to observing or following assumptions.

It's similar, in my mind, to the constitution of the United States. Without the constitution it's very unlikely that we would be living as well as we're living, and so we know that we are derived from the constitution. At the same time, all of us know that it's also our citizens' responsibility to challenge what is called the constitution, to keep it fresh, to not simply blindly demure to all the people who claim to speak for it. So, in the same way as meditators, who are we in this tradition of Goenka? We're students of the Buddha but we're not Buddhists.

And the Buddha did not say that the path of Vipassana is a way to avoid suffering. He said that the path of Vipassana is a way to become aware of suffering, so that you can begin the path out of it. And that means that when you meditate in a serious way you will encounter those things that trouble you.

I keep asking myself, 45 years after first meditating: what does it mean that I'm a student of the Buddha but I'm not a Buddhist? What is the essence of the Buddha's teaching? The first thing is that the Buddha defined the goal of human life as being peaceful. Inner peace, peaceful inside yourself and peaceful between yourself and other people. Maybe today we've begun to take that for granted, it may be a cliché in California, and it may be a cliché among Vipassana meditators, but it was a brand new idea. The goal is to live a life of peace and harmony.

I don't think the idea of the Buddha, that we should live in peace, has yet caught on in most parts of the Earth. We could say the idea was born 2500 years ago and is still being born. When we look at what is capturing to our minds about the practice of Vipassana, that's the first thing that captures my mind – and to me it's both rational and emotional. After all, what could be better than a life of peace? And what could be more appealing than a life of peace?

*Vipassana meditation teachers learn a great deal from leading courses. The following is from a conversation with a teacher who has extensive experience with courses in prison.*



### **What is the biggest challenge for students sitting a 10-day prison course?**

That's easy: following the rules, especially noble silence. Students talking at night is a problem; it disturbs others. One student said to me after a course, "it can seem like rules are made to put us down. But now I see that these rules are made to help us." I like that, because it's true. The rules help you stay focused, and with a quieter mind you can go deeper in meditation. Going deeper, you purify the defilements. If you don't keep silent, you can't do that.

### **What can students do to connect with positive energy, energy that will encourage them to continue to practice?**

They need to support each other. They need to sit courses, volunteer at orientations, read the newsletters. They need to support each other and create a dhamma community. It also helps to read books. If you don't have any dhamma books, ask the appropriate staff person to contact the VPT, and we will make this happen.

### **Why is meditation boring?**

(Laughs.) Meditation is not boring; our minds are boring. Boredom is just craving, manifested in a different way. It's the mind wanting constant excitement. And craving constantly reinforces itself. This in turn reinforces negative mind states: being violent, angry, and reactive. If you never deal with the root of these, you are not in control of your mind. Instead, your reactions are controlling you. And reacting is often what lands someone in prison in the first place.

### **Sometimes it can be hard to remember the point of meditation.**

People come to meditation for two reasons, one healthy and one unhealthy. A quieter atmosphere, a change from usual prison life: these are the unhealthy reasons. And people who come to a course for unhealthy reasons usually don't last. The healthy want to change something in their lives. When they look at their mind they realize they don't like what they see. Something needs to change. And what they really want is peace of mind. If you don't want to change, that's your choice, and you'll suffer the consequences. But if you want to change, this is the way to do it.

### **If meditation is so great, why isn't it more popular?**

It's uncomfortable. It's difficult. Craving and ignorance – we are addicted to these mind states. Anyone who has ever dealt with an addiction knows how hard it is to break. So instead of meditating, some people give in to their old addictions: craving and ignorance. Doing so is like scratching a mosquito bite. It feels good at first, but then it feels worse.

### **We are told to love, but what if I feel I have to hate to survive?**

People can't go into the general population of the prison with the openness they have at the end of a course – I understand that. But ultimately we are talking about how, day-to-day-to-day, to be less reactive. If you are in a difficult situation in prison, you want to act in a way that works for you. If you get angry, hit somebody, and get thrown in isolation for a long time – is that benefiting you? As you develop in dhamma you will find that you are more likely not to react. Instead you can act in a way that is strong and better for you.

### **Is there anything else you would like to say?**

Yes. I am so impressed by the dedication of the "old" students – and the courage of the new students.