



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XLIII • NOVEMBER 2022

WORDS OF WISDOM

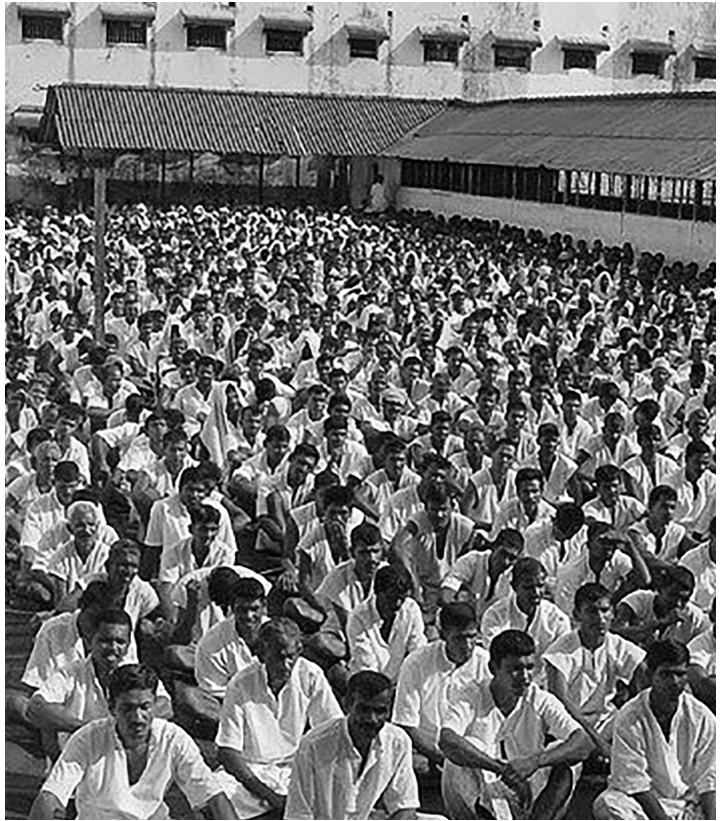
There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die.
But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.

Dhammapada 1.6

A MESSAGE FOR EVERYONE WHO SUFFERS

Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka delivered the following message to an audience of prisoners and prison staff at Tihar Prison in India in January 1994.

Goenka first learned Vipassana meditation in the 1950s in Burma. In 1969 he moved to India, his parents' homeland, and began teaching this ancient technique in the land of its origin. From there it spread around the world. Today, more than 100,000 people per year take Vipassana courses at meditation centers in the Americas, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Asia, and Africa.



Friends, you have all assembled here to liberate yourselves, liberate yourselves from all bondages, all miseries. To be imprisoned in prisons like this is a great agony. And to be liberated from prison is very fortunate. But besides the confinement within these four walls, there is a greater prison in which all of us suffer so much. This is the prison of our own negativities, our own mental defilements, which keep overpowering us.

We have become the slaves of our own anger, hatred, ill will, animosity; slaves of our defilements of craving, clinging, greed, passion, attachment, ego. Any defilement that arises in our minds overpowers us – makes us its prisoner so quickly! We start suffering immediately. This is not limited to the area inside these prison walls. People inside this jail or outside this jail are all prisoners of their own habit patterns. They keep generating one negativity or the other, and they keep on suffering.

If we are relieved of these negativities, we start enjoying the true happiness of liberation. We start enjoying real peace, real harmony. When our minds are freed from impurities, the entire habit pattern of our life changes. A pure mind is naturally full of love and compassion, infinite love and compassion; full of joy, sympathetic joy; and full of equanimity of mind. This is real happiness, real peace, real harmony.

The bondage of mental defilements is a universal bondage. And the happiness of liberation from these negativities is also universal. Anyone who comes out of this bondage starts to enjoy peace and harmony. The technique is so scientific, so results-oriented, so non-sectarian. It brings you the message of liberation, the message of peace and harmony. May all of you who participate in this camp work diligently, patiently and persistently, to come out of your bondages, all your miseries. May a new era start in your lives. May Dhamma bring you full liberation. May you all enjoy real peace, real harmony.

FIND MEANING AND CULTIVATE INNER PEACE

This is an excerpt from the book “Cultivating Inner Peace,” by Paul Fleischman, a Massachusetts teacher of Vipassana. The book is published by Pariyatti Publishing in Seattle.

Inner peace can be studied the way the naturalist George Schaller likes to study pandas and snow leopards – as an endangered species. How can I stalk this elusive species of human emotional life, track it to its lair, and then, like a modern environmental naturalist rather than an old-fashioned safari hunter, not merely capture it, but instead meet it upon trusting and intimate terms, proclaim its territory a sacred preserve, and so ensure its continuity and vigor as a free spirit in the world for years to come? If my hunting of this legendary mood were successful, I could return to America and write an article for National Geographic, promoting the Inner Peace International Wildlife Refuge and illustrating with Kodachrome photographs its exotic and enchanted terrain.

In fact, I have made many such expeditions to the last hideouts of wild peace, but my slides are all blank. The cat wasn't in the viewfinder. Like all psychological phenomena, inner peace is rare, intermittent, developmental, like a friendship patiently cultivated with a lynx. You will find it impossible to merely saunter up and pet it, for your subject will simply vanish at your approach.

Before you can befriend inner peace, you have to shed your old ways and enter its ground on its own terms. It will take tenacity, faith, and maybe even years of observation before you find yourself face to face. At your first glimpse of this wonderful manifestation of creation, you will chuck your camera. The only way to know whether you have captured it will be whether any change flashes into your demeanor.

Although inner peace is so cautious in letting you approach, everyone has had the glimpse. Inner peace is a universal experience, filed in memory among the mother-breath of soil and living grass, which were so close to us when we were toddlers, yet which faded from our familiar touch.

Inner peace is much more than a nostalgic cloud. It's an adult concern, an urgent yearning that can motivate mature lives, a potent life force. Without peace, we feel our days and years haven't brought to fruit the truest, deepest seed in us. It is a call from the center of ourselves, from the place behind the waterfall. If inner peace is really as I have described it, a natural phenomenon, a sweet memory, and a provocative force, then why does it remain furtive behind the hubbub of our ordinary days? Something is in the way. A conflict in human nature blocks us.

Inner peace is an aspect of spiritual life that derives from the awareness of our own insubstantiality. Inner peace isn't a single emotion, but a felt relation to the vast project of finding meaning and purpose within the context of incomprehensible infinitude. Like any relationship, peace has its moods, ascents, nadirs, eclipses, and laws.

You can now understand that when I write about inner peace, I am not referring to an object, a fixed, blissful glee, but to a dimension of existence that is complex, variable, and multifaceted, which nevertheless leaves only its own footprints, has exactly its own visage. We have all known it, lost it, found it, thrown it away, wanted it again. But don't you find, as I do, that the longer you live, the more value you place upon it? How can you turn your life toward the peaceful transcendence of your own limited time without becoming foolhardy or inept, remaining worldly and skillful, yet focused more and more on peace?

Inner peace will grow in your life in proportion to its importance to you. No one could imagine an entrepreneur who devoted twenty minutes twice a day to his business and expected it to prosper. No one could imagine a mother who took care of her children one day a week and expected them to thrive. Like a business, like a child, inner peace will flower only from the sunshine of your focalizing effort. But



realistically, how much time can you spend pursuing inner peace? If twenty minutes twice a day isn't enough; if one whole day a week isn't enough, will you have to give up everything in order to pursue this course?

Over the years that I have studied people who obtained deep, recurrent, long-abiding, life-transforming and outward-reaching experiences of inner peace, I have found one salient common bond they all share. Inner peace is found by an intensity of devotion to the goal so relentless and powerful that it bursts through the bidirectionality of life, and suffuses the survival-oriented, adaptational daily tasks with the transcendental, all-permitting light.

The first rule on the quest for inner peace is to make it the number one priority without disrupting or devaluing the spectrum of daily life. Twenty minutes twice a day, or one day a week isn't enough, because inner peace has no separate time or place. It is the infusion of mundane savvy with transcendental fervor that marks "wisdom" – a psychological truth to be found in every culture, religion, and era. Peace comes from the holy fire of concentrated intention. Still engaged, the man or woman truly on the path seeks every moment as the one in which to activate life's highest blessing.



This intentional concentration translates best into contemporary phrasing as the word "pace": appreciating what you have or do, and not having or doing more than you can appreciate. I'm using the word "pace" in contrast to "distraction," which presages dissatisfaction. Our lives are our feelings, and feelings unfold slowly, cued by their invisible tempo. The most obdurate obstacle to peace in the lives of many people today is the rate at which they move and think, without allowing time for the glow of peace to filter up and pervade their pauses. The punctuation-less, run-on sentence of modern life derives not only from obligations in work and family, but ironically from the harried pursuit of pleasure too.

It's important to appreciate at the outset that peace is a dynamic product of the way you live, and not a mere parenthesis or vacation from who you really are. This way, your whole being can become entrained behind it, and can contribute to your momentum. Don't look for a safe platform, but for a direction recurrently renewed, until your friendships, your diet, your work, your reading all add to your downhill, first-class, express train of peace.

Another way of describing "dynamic" is: committed, forgiving, patient. If you want to find inner peace, you will need a new criterion for all your life choices, and that is the criterion of emotional tone. You will need to initiate decisions based not upon convenience, success, or conformity, but upon how the outcome will affect your peace of mind. Inner peace will have to become the rudder by which you navigate the straits of great and small decisions.

LEARNING TO LIVE LIFE – A BREATH AT A TIME

Many things can happen while sitting a Vipassana meditation course. Sitting down to calm the mind and explore what is actually going on inside yourself may sound easy. Few valuable things are easy, though, and neither is this.

Many first-time meditators even struggle to find the words to express what they have been through. Often, though, the words do come bubbling up. And frequently these are eloquent and profound.

Here is how the Vipassana experience seemed to Ya'acov, a student on the first prison course held in Israel, in 2006. He offered these thoughts to everyone who attended the ceremony following the end of the 10-day course, both prisoners and staff.

Before I tell you all the things I have to say, I want to express my thanks and gratitude to the warden and the commander. I really want to thank you for allowing this course to happen. I also want to thank the wonderful people who went through the process with us: our instructors. This is the first time in my life that I feel that people came to take care of me.

Maybe that was what helped me continue and not give up, because I thought: if people like that come to take care of me and give me the space to do my thing, I can't give up.

Let me share with you some of the process I went through. I started sitting on the cushion, and tried to do what they told me to. It's hard to describe. I never imagined it would be so difficult. Just observing my breathing, in and out. I felt I was fighting someone who wouldn't let me rest. And that really connected me to my own life. I never knew how to look at the here and now. I always looked at the future, which was unknown, or at the past, which was already gone. I gave up. Each time I ran into some difficulty, I ran away.

And the same goes for the mind. I try to bring it back, tame it, tell it: "Listen to the breathing, don't take me back there again." It goes there, I bring it back. It goes there, I bring it back... And slowly, with great determination, great effort, and great persistence, you somehow manage to balance things a bit, and succeed in doing it for a bit longer.

Maybe only when I finished I realized how good this is, how happy I am to have completed this course. So many things are clearer to me now: that you actually have to learn to live life, to deal with what happens to you. And that other people and the environment are not the problem. You yourself are your problem.

And if you don't learn to look within and see what's happening, you'll always be running away, you'll never be in the reality. There was a sentence at the end of the day, that the teacher Mr. Goenka would say: "May all living creatures be happy." And that is really what I wish for you all. Thank you.

