



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF WISDOM

Look not to the faults of others, nor to their omissions and commissions.

But rather look to your own acts, to what you have done and left undone.

Dhammapada 4.50

HELPFUL MEDITATION – FOR PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE



The Vipassana Prison Trust (VPT) is a non-profit, all-volunteer organization. It was appointed in 2002 by Vipassana Teacher S.N. Goenka with a mandate to offer Vipassana meditation courses to incarcerated men and women in North America. The volunteers who make up the Vipassana Prison Trust do this so that inmates can change their lives during and after their incarceration, so that correctional institutions may run more safely and effectively, and so that corrections personnel may work in a less stressful environment.

The VPT offers to inmates the same 10-day meditation courses that are provided to people at hundreds of meditation centers all over the world (including fourteen in the United States and five in Canada). Our trained volunteer staff works with institutional personnel to prepare the course site to suit that correctional environment's unique conditions. At the time of the course, a Vipassana teacher and course assistants remain within the facility providing instruction and support day and night, for the full ten days.

Behind the scenes, VPT members and supporters provide the volunteer training and coordination needed for each and every course. Members also do what is necessary to assure that the VPT remains accessible, accountable, and makes best use of its resources.

The VPT consists of people from all walks of life – men and women of all ages, ethnicities, and religious beliefs. These people live in various parts of both the United States and Canada, and come together to offer their time and energy to make meditation courses happen. This can at times be tiring and demanding work; it is also hugely satisfying. Knowing that people inside the institution are benefiting, that meditating is helping them be more insightful, peaceful, and happy, is a special kind of reward.

The one thing all VPT members have in common is our practice of Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr. Goenka and a long line of predecessors. All members of the VPT, including course personnel, Trust members, directors, and consultants, work on their own time – none of us are paid. The VPT has no political, social or ideological agenda. We offer helpful meditation: that is all.

As meditators in this tradition, we serve in this way partly for our own benefit – to develop the qualities and attributes that help us progress in our own meditation practice. Our service, whether it is directly with inmates or behind the scenes preparing for courses, is given with gratitude for the opportunity to do this important work.

DOING NOTHING – EXCEPT GIVING THE MIND SPACE

This is an excerpt from the book “A Lifetime Doing Nothing: Tales, Teachings, and Testimonials,” by a Canadian meditator, Ian McCrorie. The book is published by Pariyatti Publishing in Seattle.

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), a French mathematician and writer, once declared that “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” This is the most graphic summation of the conundrum of the human condition, which is our tendency to blindly react. We scratch every itch. We are easily triggered. It seems we can’t do otherwise.

Ironically, seeing the problem, understanding the extent of its reach, also opens a portal to the answer. I, for one, seemed predisposed to convolute, to make a mountain out of every molehill, real or imagined, by blindly and/or habitually reacting to things I liked with unbridled happiness and to things I disliked with despair. I’d further compromise this conditioned reaction with deeply ingrained hope or its flip side, anxiety.

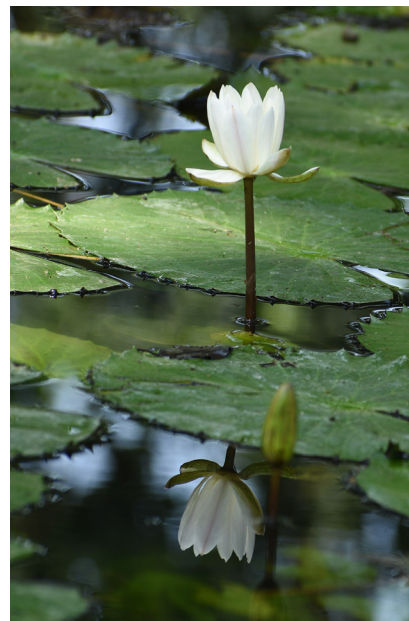
Pascal figured that the way to transcend all my self-induced histrionics was to cultivate the skill “to sit quietly in a room alone.” In essence, to do nothing, letting our conditioned and habitual responses just lie there, simmering away, without jumping in and stirring up an already boiling pot. Two thousand years before Pascal, the Chinese sage Lao Tzu called this skill “doing non-doing.”

Self-introspection is not the strongest attribute of human beings. Our forefathers survived primarily because they were men of action, fleeing or fighting as the situation demanded. And they hunted in groups, perhaps the only time they were quiet. Sound familiar? Of course it does, because we as a species haven’t evolved much, especially as far as the mind is concerned.

The first time I attempted to sit quietly in a room alone, my body soon began to fidget. I couldn’t seem to get comfortable. I blamed, in order, the cushion underneath me, the temperature in the room, and the sunlight streaming in the window. My mind ran amok, flitting first here and then there like some wild monkey, devoid of rhyme or reason. Any attempt at even the simple observation of my breath was shunted aside by flashbacks, memories, plans, hopes, fears. Very soon, a craving for distraction arose. I was desperate for a book to read, some music to listen to, a movie to watch, or a bag of Doritos to chow down on. My self-image was quite shaken. I was shocked to realize my mind resembled an Energizer Bunny on steroids. It appeared to run on a loop of hyperactive blind reactions to whatever popped up into my consciousness.

I realized I had been raging and winging over every trifling insult or comeuppance in my life until exasperation and reactivity were my fallback positions. I lived in a constant state of panic because what else is there to do?! Because I had seldom, if ever, sat quietly in a room alone, the irony was that I thought my mind was akin to a well-oiled racing bicycle. Of course, I was totally deluded. I had equated intelligence, literacy, strong opinions, and popularity with a beautiful mind. In fact, my mind more resembled that rusted old clunker in the back of the garage. Many decades later, the good news is that I can assure you that a well-oiled racing bike does lie somewhere within all of us, but it resides buried under hyperactive and delusional thinking patterns. But there is even better news and it is threefold.

First, Blaise Pascal was right. In my experience, all our problems do indeed stem from this hyperactive and delusional thinking we have acquired over time. Second, there is a way to eradicate the light-speed, blind reactions and habitual confusion. And third, the way is very simple. It boils down to just two words: do nothing. That’s it. Do nothing. Sit quietly in a room alone and do nothing. Watch the monkey mind and do not try to fix it or eliminate it or drown it out or engage it.





This is doing non-doing. Observe the mind, on autopilot as usual, screaming editorial comments from the sidelines like some frenzied play-by-play announcer – and do nothing about it. Don't turn the monologue into a dialogue. Do nothing. “Nothing to see here, folks. Let's keep it moving.” What else is there to do? Only one thing. You can do non-doing.

And over time, the mind calms. As the panic subsides, the mind gains insight into its own machinations. This insight removes some, most, or all of the mess covering the well-oiled bicycle. Doing non-doing helps you find what you never lost. Almost everyone catches fleeting glimpses of this non-doing mind from time to time. They may not understand what it was at the time, only that it was an unexplainable, peaceful interlude that came out of the blue. I had two such interludes which I didn't understand until much later in my life but for which I am thankful nevertheless, for they planted seeds of possibility in my deeper subconscious.

If it is not already clear, it cannot be emphasized often enough that non-doing is not lethargy. Nor is it apathy, sloth, or laziness. It is not complacency or inactivity. It is not relaxation or spacing out. It is, however, a conscious effort to calmly abide the push-me, pull-me beckoning of old habit patterns. At a deeper level, before we do anything, before we fight or take flight, before we speak harshly or critically, before we even lift a finger, neurotransmitters in different parts of our mind have been hard at work judging, comparing, remembering, hoping, and fearing, and then mixing all these disparate elements into a primordial soup, spicing the whole mess with our predispositions, idiosyncrasies, and habitual tendencies. Just as rainwater follows the well-worn gullies and troughs down the hill, our reactions to different situations are preordained.

“We've already made the decision.” Non-doing simply and calmly observes the mind being called to action. Doing nothing is an introspective skill for understanding what is going on in the mind. This skill is active in that it requires effort, but it is an effortless effort. Perspiration is not involved.

Alertness is. Being present. Mindful. Without these things, old habit patterns, relentless in their ability to get us to behave as we always have, or you might say as we have been trained to do, would continue to rule the roost. They have been so successful that we may think these patterns express our true nature. They don't.

So that's it. It is really that simple. Sit alone in a room quietly. Keeping the spine as straight as possible will help to keep lethargy at bay. At first it is normal to feel somewhat self-conscious, so be aware of any tendency to offset your apprehension by going overboard, attempting to mimic a pencil-thin sadhu from India. This is not a photo op for the cover of *Serenity Now!* What you are doing – or better, not doing – is not very special. It is no big deal. Sitting is just providing the mind with lots of space.

FROM HUMBLE FARMER TO MEDITATION MASTER

In 1903 – the same year the Wright brothers conducted the first powered flight and the Boston Red Sox won the first-ever World Series – a personal tragedy led a humble farmer in Burma, a country in southeast Asia near India, to seek a way out of suffering. This set in motion a series of events that reverberate to the present time.

Saya Thetgyi (pronounced sa-YA-ta-ji) was an uneducated farmer who grew up poor in a small village. It may seem



unlikely that such a person would one day become a renowned Vipassana teacher. Yet he became a key link in the chain of teachers who preserved and spread this valuable technique so that we can receive and practice it today.

On his farm, Saya Thetgyi grew rice like most of his neighbors, planting by hand and preparing the soil with the help of water buffaloes. His village, which lay across the river from the capital city Rangoon, was a beautiful and peaceful place to live. But its peace and harmony was shattered in 1903 when a cholera epidemic broke out, killing many villagers, including Saya Thetgyi's own son and daughter. It is said that his daughter, who was very dear to him, died in his arms. Overcome with grief, Saya Thetgyi could find no solace, and finally decided to leave his village in search of a path out of suffering.

After several years of wandering across Burma, he came in touch with the renowned monk Ledi Sayadaw, who taught him Vipassana meditation. For seven years, Saya Thetgyi practiced with Ledi Sayadaw.

Villagers tell the story of how Saya Thetgyi one day arrived back in his home village to check on his family and farm. As he entered the village he saw a memorial to his daughter and burst into tears. He realized that he had

not overcome his attachment to his children and the suffering of losing them.

He also understood that he had to continue meditating to liberate himself. Saya Thetgyi made rapid progress in his meditation and eventually the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw appointed him to teach Vipassana. "Here, my great pupil," he said, "take my staff and go... You have been successful. From today onwards, you must teach the Dhamma of mind and matter to six thousand people."

Initially, it was difficult for Saya Thetgyi to fulfill his teacher's wish, because people did not believe that a layperson had sufficient knowledge to teach meditation. But soon word spread that the technique he was teaching really did help, and people started to come to Saya Thetgyi's farm. He built a small meditation hall there, so that all kinds of people could learn Vipassana and come out of suffering.

At times there were up to 200 people on courses, among them monks, nuns, manual laborers and even government officials. One official who came to learn Vipassana was Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who later became S.N. Goenka's teacher. So, in a sense, Saya Thetgyi is Goenka's "Dhamma grandfather" and our "Dhamma great-grandfather."

The understanding that suffering exists is the first Noble Truth. If we merely accept the reality of suffering, though, and stop there, we would not find a way out of it. Meditating helps us explore and experience a path that leads to the end of suffering. Like Saya Thetgyi, we can start to find a way out of the prison of our mind.