

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF WISDOM

Wonderful it is to train the mind, so swiftly moving, seizing whatever it wants.
Good it is to have a well-trained mind, for a well-trained mind brings happiness.

Dhammapada 3.53

TO THE LAST, GUIDING AND INSPIRING OTHERS

Omar Rahman was one of the original Dhamma Brothers. Vipassana meditation courses started being offered at the William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility, a maximum-security institution in Alabama, in 2002 and Omar joined course after course. Outside Donaldson, many people got to know about the prison courses by seeing the film “The Dhamma Brothers.” More got to know about Omar in particular by reading the book “Letters from The Dhamma Brothers.”

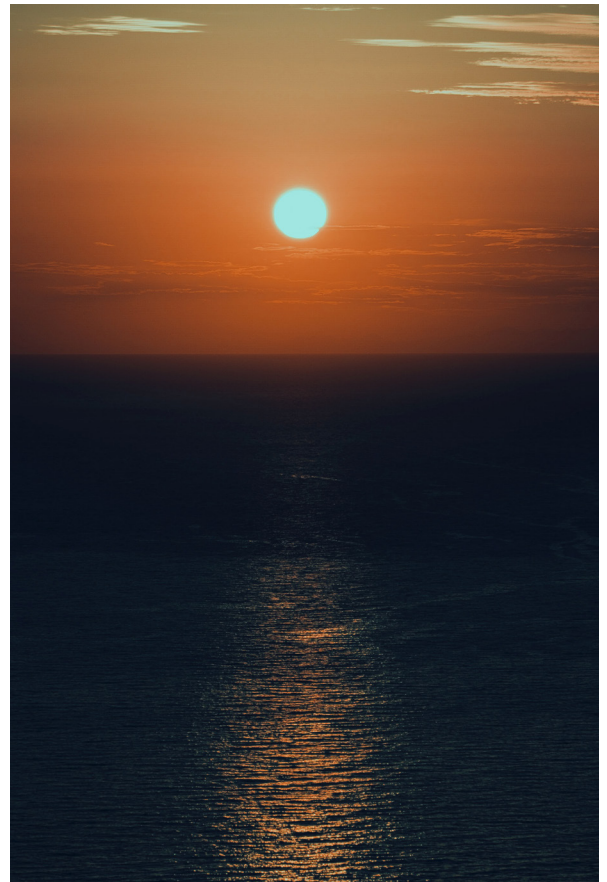
When the April 2009 course took place, Omar was staying in the prison infirmary. He was suffering from advanced liver cancer. More than half a year before, doctors had told him that he had only six months to live. Despite this, Omar was happy to know that another course was happening at Donaldson. Even though he was very weak, he resolved to be there. For the first six days, leaning on a cane,

Omar walked from the infirmary to the gym, where the course was being held. There, in an interview room adjacent to the gym, he would meditate for a few hours. He would sometimes be dizzy and shaking with weakness, but he was determined. During this time, one of the inmate servers helping on the course was going through difficulties.

Although Omar could barely hold a spoon to eat, he talked to this man each day and helped him deal with the problems. To his last, Omar was guiding and inspiring others. During his months in the infirmary, Omar used to say that he was not going to die in prison. In fact, a new Alabama state law allowed for the release of certain prisoners with a terminal illness. This provision had yet to be used. But on the seventh day of the course, Omar was taken in a wheelchair to his sister’s car and drove out with her, away from Donaldson. The next day his wish came true. Omar died peacefully in his sleep at his sister’s home.

At the course graduation ceremony, many of the students spoke about how much Omar meant to them. He had really touched and moved many people in Donaldson, and many other people beyond.

In a 2006 letter, Omar described the impact of Vipassana on his life. “As an Imam and having taken the Vipassana course, I began to emphasize the importance of being observant and attentive,” he wrote. “For instance, the Quran constantly mentions the importance of being mindful and observant of what is in the heart. Prior to the Vipassana course, these were words of wisdom. After Vipassana these words became a practice.”



OVER AND OVER AND OVER: MEDITATING MEANS EXPERIENCING CONSTANT CHANGE

Here is an excerpt from "The Meditator's Handbook" by Bill Crecelius. It is published by Pariyatti Publishing in Seattle.

If someone were to count the number of times that Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka mentions anicca (change, impermanence) during a 10-day course they would be amazed. He says it over and over. He is trying to drive home a point, but many students just gloss over it, or miss it entirely. He repeats it because it is IMPORTANT. One of the most important things to remember as a new student or even a student that has done dozens of courses is anicca. Goenka continually says, "maintain equanimity and keep knowing anicca" or "maintain equanimity with the appreciation of anicca." He ends the instructions at the beginning of each sitting with these words after Vipassana is introduced. What does he mean when he says this? Why do you think he keeps saying it over and over?

Keep knowing anicca means to be aware of the sensations you are feeling and know that they are changing and impermanent and to continue doing this for as long as you can. When you realize you have stopped observing this object then begin again. Every moment as you pass your attention through your body, whether going part by part or when you are working with the flow, in order to get the full benefit of your efforts you have to continually be aware that these sensations are changing. There is never a moment when they are not changing.

Most likely until you started practicing Vipassana you were never aware of it, or maybe vaguely aware intellectually but were not experiencing it. Now you are aware of the sensations, but that is not enough, you must also be aware and try to experience that within that sensation there is an oscillation that is changing. It is anicca. It doesn't matter if the sensation is so subtle that you can barely experience the arising and falling within the sensation you are feeling. It doesn't matter if it is gross pain or a dull area. Just be aware that as your attention reaches this spot that it is changing.

The entire universe is changing; you are changing. Everything is anicca. Part of the problem is that the awareness of anicca is difficult to implement in your practice. Another part of the problem is that one doesn't hear what Goenka is saying or doesn't feel it is important. Students are consumed by just trying to feel sensation. You have felt sensation and you are also aware that it is not important what type of sensation you feel. Any sensation is good. Gross or subtle, it doesn't matter. One of the biggest traps students fall into is the craving for subtle sensations. The mind naturally tends towards craving for pleasant sensations and aversion to unpleasant sensations. This is its conditioning. This is the cause of suffering. The training is to come out of suffering. Very soon after starting Vipassana, Goenka begins telling students to observe things as they are. He says that whatever sensation comes up you are to just observe that. Instead, many students want something they don't have and begin craving. On day nine of the ten-day course Goenka discusses bhanga for the first time. Bhanga is when your body opens up and the entire mass is filled with very subtle sensations. For this to take place you don't have to do anything, it just happens. The word has such a ring to it that it sometimes creates confusion in students' minds. It just rings with the sound of something special. We think, "Oh, this must be important, I must get this. This is what I want."

Ah, that is what you want. It isn't what is, but it is what you want. This becomes a problem for you because, as you know, as soon as you start craving you are running in the opposite direction of the Dhamma. You are not being equanimous; you are reacting. It is best to understand what bhanga is. It is a natural phenomenon that may occur in meditation. Almost all the sensations that manifest themselves on your body while you are meditating are just the past conditionings of your mind expressed on your body. Other causes may be the food that you eat, the atmosphere around you, or your present thoughts. When one starts Vipassana, many times one feels gross, solidified sensations. As the hours and days pass, as one reaches greater depths of awareness, one notices more subtle sensations appear in different areas of the body. It may be that there are subtle sensations everywhere on the surface of the body. When this happens we call it free flow and you can easily move your attention in a sweeping movement along the surface of the body. When those sensations penetrate throughout the body, inside and outside, and there are no blockages, this is bhanga.

The sensations associated with bhanga are very pleasurable. Because of this, many students think this is the goal of meditation. But this is not the case. The sensations are constantly changing. One moment there may be pain, the



next there may be heat or cold, etc., and the next there may be a pleasurable sensation. The trouble arises when the student likes that pleasurable sensation but, like the previous sensations, these also change: *anicca*, *anicca*. Yet, you want that sensation. Then the game of sensations begins. It is a game that can't be won.

Now remember that every sensation is changing. It is *anicca*. That's all there is to it. Feel the sensation while also being equanimously aware of its arising and passing. It is simple, but not easy to do. At first you may keep forgetting that your goal is not only to be aware of the sensations but also to let a part of your mind be aware that these sensations are changing. This awareness will slip away, but as soon as you realize that you have forgotten then start knowing *anicca* again. Of course it will again slip away. This is a training. A training of the mind, to be aware of the fact that the sensation you are feeling is impermanent.

Within the sensations there is arising and falling. It may be happening slowly. Arising ... falling. Or it may be happening very, very quickly. Just observe that. Be aware of that. It doesn't matter if it is hot or cold, itchy or painful, vibrating or dull. Just be aware of that arising and falling, *anicca*. That should be your goal. That is all you have to do: feel the sensation and know its impermanent nature. Continually feel it without interruption and don't react. Slowly it will become a part of your practice. The first step is to try.

CHANGE YOURSELF AND YOU CHANGE THE WORLD

Teachers answer questions from students at Vipassana courses all around the world. The following are questions students asked teacher S.N. Goenka.

Student: *How can a truly spiritual person face this world?*

Teacher: Try to change yourself – the way in which you are reacting and making yourself miserable. For instance, when somebody is angering you, understand that this person is miserable. It is the problem of that person. Why make it your problem? Why start generating anger and making yourself miserable? Doing that means you are not your own master; whenever that person wants to, he can make you miserable. Be your own master. Then you can live a good life, in spite of everything happening around you.

Student: *How does one escape anger?*

Teacher: With the practice of Vipassana! A Vipassana student observes respiration, or observes the bodily sensations caused when angry. This observation is with equanimity, with no reaction. The anger soon weakens and passes away. Through continued practice of Vipassana, the habit pattern of the mind to react with anger is changed. Suffering, war and conflict are as old as history. Do you really believe in a world of peace? Well, even if a few people come out of misery, it is good. When there is darkness all around and one lamp has started giving light, it is good. And like this, if one lamp becomes ten lamps, or twenty lamps, the darkness will get dispelled here and there. There is no guarantee that the entire world will become peaceful, but as much peace as you can make yourself – that much you are helping the peace of the world.

Student: *What is metta?*

Teacher: Metta or Metta-Bhavana is the technique of generating vibrations of goodwill and compassion that a Vipassana student is first taught on the tenth day of a ten-day Vipassana course. Later, at the end of every Vipassana course, or a one-hour sitting, a meditator is asked to practice metta, to share the merits gained with all beings.

Student: *I can't suppress my anger, even if I try. What should I do?*

Teacher: Don't suppress it. Observe it. The more you suppress it, the more it goes to the deeper levels of your mind. The complexes become stronger and stronger, and it is so difficult to come out of them. No suppression, no expression. Just observe.

Student: *How can the mind remain balanced when we are in pain?*

Teacher: Whenever something happens in the external world that we do not like, there are unpleasant sensations in the body. A Vipassana meditator focuses the entire attention on these sensations without reacting, just observing them very objectively. It is very difficult in the beginning, but slowly it becomes easier to observe the gross unpleasant sensations – what we call pain – with a balanced, calm mind. Pleasant, unpleasant, makes no difference. Every sensation arises only to pass away. Why react to something that is so ephemeral?

