

# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XLVII • MARCH 2023

## WORDS OF DHAMMA

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*

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CRAVING AND DESIRE?

*Meditation students ask questions of teachers at Vipassana centers all around the world. Often these are asked in private settings, with only the student and teacher present. Here are some questions and answers that came about when students met Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka. These first appeared in the Vipassana Prison Trust Newsletter in March 2013.*

*Question: Is a strong desire the same as craving?*

Teacher: There is a difference. Whether there is craving or not will be judged this way... If you don't get it, and you feel depressed, then it was craving. If you don't get it, and you just smile, then it was just a desire. It didn't turn into craving. Whenever there is a craving and clinging and you don't get something, you are bound to become miserable. If you are becoming miserable, then there was some craving.



*Question: If craving and aversion are to be avoided, what are they replaced with?*

Teacher: They are replaced with love, compassion, goodwill. The mind becomes more and more impure as you start generating craving and aversion. This is a habit pattern going back far into the past. Before, you kept on generating craving and aversion; and now again you generate craving and aversion. You are becoming more and more miserable.

By this meditation technique, though, the habit pattern changes and the mind becomes purer and purer, free from craving, free from aversion. A pure mind by nature is full of love, full of compassion. You don't harm yourself; you don't harm others. Just eradicate the impurities in the mind and love and compassion is a natural result.

*Question: Isn't this technique self-centered? How can we become active and help others?*

Teacher: First, you have to be self-centered; you have to help yourself. Unless you help yourself, you cannot help others. A weak person cannot help another weak person. You have to become strong yourself, and then use this strength to help others and make others strong also. Vipassana helps you develop this strength to help others.

## LIVING WITH INTENTION GIVES YOUR LIFE A DIRECTION

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*This is an excerpt, slightly edited, of an old student talk by Dr. Paul Fleischman, a Vipassana teacher living in Massachusetts. The talk, titled *Who We Are And Why We Are The Way We Are*, was first presented in October 2019.*



One feature of the Buddha's teaching that appeals to me is that it's elegant. Elegance is a phrase that's used in scientific study. A scientific formula is supposed to be elegant as well as true. Einstein phrased it: a scientific hypothesis should capture the most widely available ideas and data in the simplest format. When we think about the Buddha's teaching and the way we learn it from S.N. Goenka, it's quite elegant. We're simply trying to be at peace with our minds and our bodies, to observe them without reacting to them, and to feel the well-being of just sitting still and not getting upset. That's a pretty simple and beautifully elegant idea.

Another idea from the Buddha that is, I think, at the core of a focused definition of his teaching, is the idea that what is true for one person is true for all people. A universal psychology. A scientific psychology or a psychology based upon human nature.

One appealing factor of the Vipassana tradition is that it is both a mind and body practice. We observe our body using our mind. And since our mind is in our body, our mind is observing the body, and the body is observing the mind that is in the body. This integration of mind and body fits with our modern sense of human beings who are integrated mind and bodies. And the practice is uniquely synthesizing of what used to be seen as two aspects of ourselves, but which we understand to be one aspect.

Another feature of this practice that has an aesthetic elegance for me is that it seems so closely synchronized to our modern scientific worldview. When we're meditating on the arising and passing of sensations and when we're observing them as impersonal phenomena, it seems to me that we are entering into a laboratory in which we're observing the molecular atomic transformations that we know form the basis of our body. Our bodies consist of atoms and molecules and cells that are compounded and held together by scientific laws, like the laws of electromagnetism, and the laws of adaptation through natural selection and biology. And when we're observing our bodies that's exactly what we're observing.

That is to say, a transformation, and a change of all things in this world, including ourselves. So, for a person who's wedded to the scientific worldview, there is no disjunction between our meditation practice and what we have come to establish not in hundreds of data points but in probably billions or even trillions of data points, as the biological, anatomical, molecular and atomic basis of who we imagine ourselves to be.

When I sat down for my first 10-day course it seemed like it was probably going to be pretty interesting and I probably would pretty much get along with the teaching, and then suddenly, day zero, up comes sila – that is, morality. You know morality is the tool by which people are coerced into subservience to a dominant worldview that condemns aspects of the human personality. So when I heard about sila I'm going, "well, let's put this on the side and let's walk forward".

I mentioned In New York, when I first gave this particular talk, and when I walked down the streets of New York today, 45 years after my first course, the main thing I feel that has happened to me over 45 years is aligning my life with sila, morality. And that's in dramatic distinction to the way that most human beings travel through life.

What is so important about sila? I'm sorry that the word does get translated as 'morality'; to me morality is an inaccurate, old-fashioned English translation. To me the proper interpretation of sila is 'intention'. We intend to escape from suffering by walking a path, not by simply avoiding suffering. We intend to observe our minds and bodies and we intend to create a life that will not generate more suffering for ourselves. So sila is simply the skill of picking the right behaviors that will lead us in the direction that we want to go in.

Sila is not something different than Vipassana. It's not something added on like at the end of the 10-day course you add it on. Say, 'OK, now I'm willing to throw this in'. It is the intention to live the life that meditation is also intended to guide us towards. So when we're practicing sila, there really is no ulterior motive. We're practicing it as a skill that helps us practice our own meditation.

One of the dilemmas of the modern mind is that although the scientific worldview is elegant, experiential, leads to enormous benefits in terms of comfort, food, safety, shelter, communication, transportation, it does leave us in a universe that does not have personal, affectionate quality. There is no little people who we can relate to, who created the universe.

The Buddha said the universe was never created. Today we see things slightly differently. We think, "Well, maybe the universe was created 14 billion years ago or maybe there was a series of creations or maybe there is a parallel other universe that had been created." But whether it was created 14 billion years ago or whether it was never created is not a very important point to me. The important point is that it's quite difficult for a modern person to feel that life is really meaningful. So, another dimension to sila, the first dimension, is intentionality. But the second dimension is: when we're living with intention that means we are investing our life.

Like an investment made of your finances, you're investing your life in a goal, in a direction. As soon as you do that, you're giving your life meaning. You're headed somewhere. You're trying to do something. Maybe our intention in Vipassana is, in fact, exceedingly selfish and our intention is simply to walk the path out of suffering. Even if that's our only intention, it gives our life an edge.

Sila isn't practiced by taking a vow, sila is practiced every moment that you keep to it. So, every moment in which you live by sila, or try to live by sila even if you fail, you're still creating this intentional direction. It gives your life a purpose, a goal, and a meaning in that moment.



## BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT MEDITATION IS

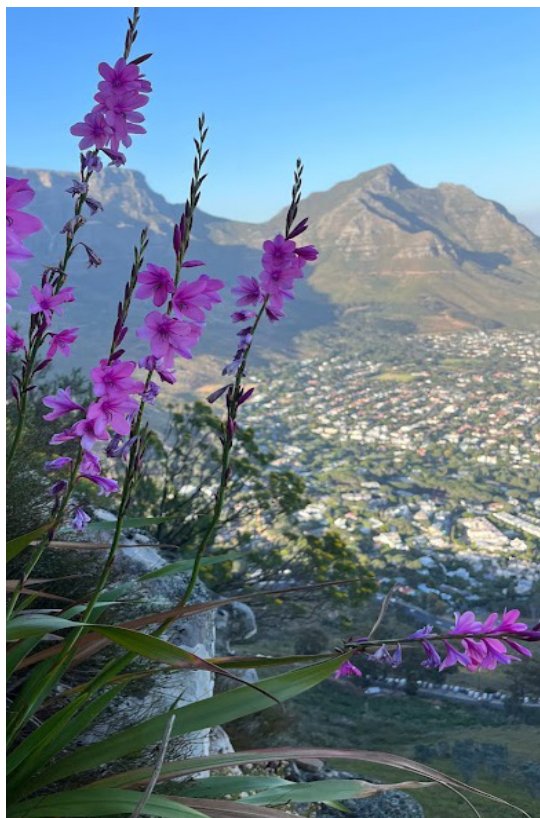
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*This is an excerpt from the book *Realizing Change – Vipassana Meditation in Action*, published by the Vipassana Research Institute.*

Meditation means different things to different people. In the Western World the word commonly carries a very loose meaning connected with “thinking things through”, “pondering”, “reflecting.” It can also have associations with prayer or religious contemplation, relaxation and altered states of consciousness. Vipassana Meditation has been growing steadily since the 1960s, but the breadth of definition can be confusing. It covers a range of activities that use the same term but in very different ways. To many people the definition seems hazy.

So what’s it all about? In Vipassana, “meditation” means mental development. It refers to certain specific exercises and techniques which are used for focusing and unknotting the mind. There are so many other pressing demands on our time and attention. So why would anyone want to meditate?

With Vipassana we learn to go inside our hearts and minds for real, to find out who we are and build on the truth. We learn how to step back from the world of stimulation outside to ground ourselves, to pull ourselves together – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually – and to reconnect ourselves with nature. We learn the peace is inside us and how to find it.



We meditate to strengthen the mind. An athlete spends hours each day keeping the body fit. The exercises we practice each day in Vipassana make for a thorough mental workout. When we do Vipassana daily, we heighten our powers of concentration. We discover fresh resources of energy. We learn a practical way of overcoming the storms and stress in our daily lives. We stop creating pain for ourselves and offloading our distress onto others.

Not only that, but we learn how to develop and share selfless compassion with others. We learn how to detoxify the mind, becoming more positive, less reactive; more understanding, less judge mental; more giving and less self-centered. We start to take control, to enrich our lives immeasurably, to change ourselves for the better.

Doubt and suspicion often accompany something new, which is what Vipassana meditation is to many. It’s healthy to be sceptical – the spiritual field has had its share of frauds, scandals, and even tragedies in recent years. Let us deal with possible misunderstandings directly. Vipassana is not about escaping the demands and responsibilities of the real world. Exactly the opposite: this meditation practice helps to enlarge our capacity for creative participation with other people. It is rightly called “the art of living.”

Is this another abstract philosophy to be debated by people in ivory towers? No, the teaching is simple and practical... Let us be clear about the goal of the technique – it is to purify the mind. Mind matters most in a person. It is the engine that drives all we say and do. The human mind is full of goodness. Unfortunately, this positivity is frequently overshadowed by powerful mental impurities such as anger, hatred, passion, and fear. Unless we can find a way to root out and release these negativities, they will remain the dominant side of our nature.

Vipassana helps us to clean up our act. The aim of the technique is control over ourselves, not the manipulation of others. Society is, after all, nothing but a group of individuals. To solve the problems of society, the problems of the individual must first be solved. We want peace in the world, yet we do nothing for the peace of the individual. How is this possible? Vipassana makes it possible for the individual to experience peace and harmony. Vipassana helps to solve the individuals’ problems. This is how society begins experiencing peace and harmony. This is how the problems of society begin to be solved.