



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Whose mind is like rock, steady, unmoved, dispassionate for things that spark passion,
unangered by things that spark anger:

When one's mind is developed like this, from where can there come suffering and stress?

Udana 4.34

WHY DO WE ACT WRONGLY (AND MAKE OURSELVES UNHAPPY)?

*This is an excerpt from the hugely popular book *The Art of Living – Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka*, by William Hart. It refers to a famous teaching by the Buddha, in which he explains the basic reality shared by every human being.*

We can eliminate the misunderstandings that cause us to act wrongly and to make ourselves unhappy – by attaining an experiential understanding of the reality of our own nature. The Buddha presented a practical method for developing self-observation through self-knowledge. This technique is Vipassana meditation.

Any attempt to reveal the truth about “oneself” immediately reveals that what one calls oneself has two aspects, body and mind. We must learn to observe both. But how can we actually experience the reality of body and mind? Accepting the explanations of others is not sufficient, nor is depending on merely intellectual knowledge. Both may guide us in the work of self-exploration, but each of us must explore and experience reality directly within ourselves.

We each experience the reality of the body by feeling it, by means of the physical sensations that arise within it. With eyes closed we know that we have hands, or any other parts of the body, because we can feel them. As a book has external form and internal content, the physical structure has an external, objective reality – the body – and an internal, subjective reality of sensation. We digest a book by reading all the words in it; we experience the body by feeling sensations. Without awareness of sensations there can be no direct knowledge of the physical structure. The two are inseparable.

Similarly, the psychic structure can be analyzed into form and content: the mind and whatever arises in the mind – any thought, emotion, memory, hope, fear, any mental event. As body and sensation cannot be experienced separately, so one cannot observe the mind apart from the contents of the mind. But mind and matter are also closely interrelated. Whatever occurs one is reflected in the other. As Buddha expressed it, “Whatever arises in the mind is accompanied by sensation.” There for observation of sensation offers a means to examine the totality of one's being, physical as well as mental.

Therefore dimensions of reality are common to every human being: the physical aspects of body and sensation, the psychic aspects of mind and its content. If the investigation is to be complete, every facet must be experienced. And all four can be experienced by observing sensation.



"HOW DO I DO THIS, AGAIN?" – TIPS ON HOW TO MEDITATE

Every evening on a 10-day Vipassana meditation course, S.N. Goenka gives a discourse, a talk, in which he helps students understand what they are experiencing and how this meditation technique works. Here is an excerpt from the discourse at the end of Day 4.

The fourth day is a very important day. This is the day you start exploring the truth about yourself at the level of bodily sensations. In the past, because of ignorance, the sensations were causes for the multiplication of your misery. But they can also be tools to eradicate misery.

Let's consider some questions which are frequently asked about the technique... Why move the attention through the body in order, and why in this order? Any order may be followed, but an order is necessary. Otherwise, there is a danger of neglecting some parts of the body, and those parts will remain blind, blank. Sensations exist throughout the body, and it is very important to develop the ability to experience them everywhere. For this purpose, moving in order is very helpful.

If in a part of the body there is no sensation, you may keep your attention there for a minute. Stay for a minute, observing calmly, quietly and equanimously. Don't develop craving for a sensation, or aversion towards the blindness. If within a minute no sensation appears, then smilingly move further. Next round, again stay for a minute.

If you have stayed for a minute and still cannot feel a sensation, then try to feel the touch of your clothing if it is a covered area, or the touch of the atmosphere if it is uncovered. Sooner or later you will begin to experience sensations there and throughout the body.

If the attention is fixed in one part of the body and a sensation starts in another, should one jump back or forward to observe this other sensation? No, continue moving in order. Don't try to stop the sensations in other parts of the body (you cannot stop them), and don't give them any importance. Observe each sensation only when you come to it, moving in order. Train yourself to observe all the different sensations in every part of the body, gross or subtle, pleasant or unpleasant, distinct or feeble.

How much time should one take to pass the attention from head to feet? This will vary according to the situation one faces. The instruction is to fix your attention in a certain area, and as soon as you feel a sensation, move ahead. It may be possible to move from head to feet in about 10 minutes, but it is not advisable to move quickly at this stage. If the mind is dull, however, there may be many areas in which it is necessary to wait for up to a minute for a sensation to appear. In that case, it may take 30 minutes or an hour to move from head to feet. The time needed to make a round is not important. Just keep working patiently, persistently; you will certainly be successful.

In how big an area should the attention be fixed? Take a section of the body about two or three inches wide, then move ahead another two or three inches, and so on. If the mind is dull, take larger areas. For example, the entire face, or the entire right upper arm. Then gradually try to reduce the area of attention.

Should one feel sensations only on the surface of the body or also in the interior? Sometimes a meditator feels sensations inside as soon as he starts Vipassana; sometimes at first he feels sensations only on the surface. Either way is perfectly all right. Having



experienced sensations everywhere on the surface, you will later start penetrating into the interior. Gradually the mind will develop the ability to feel sensations everywhere, both inside and outside, in every part of the physical structure.

When one is ignorant, sensations are means to multiply one's misery, because one reacts to them with craving or aversion. One must learn to be aware of all the different sensations without reacting to them. Instead, accept their changing, impersonal nature. By doing so, one comes out of the habit of blind reaction, one liberates oneself from misery.

What is a sensation? Anything that one feels on the physical level is a sensation – any natural, normal, ordinary bodily sensation, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Never ignore a sensation on the grounds that it is caused by atmospheric conditions, or by sitting for long hours, or by an old disease. Whatever the reason, the fact is that you feel a sensation.



Simply observe objectively, without identifying with the sensation. It is a choiceless observation. Never try to select sensations; instead, accept whatever arises naturally. The technique is not to experience something special, but to remain equanimous in the face of any sensation. Now you are learning to be aware and not to react, to feel whatever is happening at the physical level and to maintain equanimity.

If you work in this way, gradually the entire law of nature will become clear to you. This is what dhamma means: nature, law, truth. To understand truth at the experiential level, one must investigate it within the framework of the body.

Within the body as well as outside it, everything keeps changing. Every change has a cause which produces an effect, and that effect in turn becomes the cause for a further change, making an endless chain of cause and effect. And still another law will become clear: as the cause is, so the effect will be; as the seed is, so the fruit will be. Nature merely helps the quality of each seed to manifest. If one sows seeds of sweetness, the harvest will be sweetness. If one sows seeds of bitterness, the harvest will be bitterness.

There are three types of action: physical, vocal and mental. One who learns to observe oneself soon realizes that mental action is the most important, because this is the seed, the action that gives results. Vocal and physical actions are merely projections of the mental action.

At the beginning, when you sit for meditation, most of the time you will react to the sensations. But a few moments will come when you remain equanimous. Such moments are very powerful in changing the habit pattern of the mind. Gradually you'll reach the stage in which you can smile at any sensation, knowing it is changing, it is bound to pass away. To achieve this stage you have to work; no one else can work for you. It is good that you have taken the first step on the path. Now keep walking, step by step, towards your own liberation. May all of you enjoy real happiness.

THE SENSATIONS ARE THERE – AND NEVER STOP CHANGING

This is a slightly edited excerpt from A Meditator's Handbook – How to Untie Knots, by Bill Crecelius. In this popular book, a meditator expresses insights into how meditation has changed his life. He also offers suggestions, to anyone interested in establishing a meditation practice, about how they might do so – and describes what benefits they might then enjoy. A Meditator's Handbook is published by Pariyatti Press of Seattle, a major publisher of Vipassana books and other helpful materials.

When I started practicing Vipassana, it was like living with a cloud over my eyes. After taking a Vipassana course it was like the clouds started to part. There is brightness through those clouds and you can see it. One you start to practice meditation, you have the tool to remove those clouds. In order to get to that bright sunlight, you can make your job easier. Try to live your life by getting rid of distractions that make it harder to walk this Dhamma path. And focus on the good and important things that we learn during a 10-day meditation course.

For example, if someone were to count the number of times that Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka mentions annica (change or impermanence) during a 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.

It doesn't matter if you are a new student, or have done dozens of courses. Annica is still key. Goenka continually says, "maintain equanimity, and keep knowing annica" or "maintain equanimity with the appreciation of annica." He ends the instructions at the beginning of each sitting with these words. What does he mean when he says this? Why do you think he keeps saying it over and over? Keep knowing annica means to be aware of the sensations you are feeling, and to know that they are changing and impermanent. You are to continue doing this for as long as you can. When you realize that you have stopped doing this, 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 benefits 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, before you started practicing Vipassana, you were never aware of sensations, or maybe vaguely aware. Now you are aware of the sensations, but that is not enough. Also be aware, and try to experience, that within that sensation there is an oscillation that is changing. That is annica.

It is the knowledge that one needs. It doesn't matter if the sensation is so subtle that 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, the sensation is changing. The entire universe is changing. You are changing. Everything is annica.

