



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

Entangled by the bonds of hate, one who seeks one's own happiness
by inflicting pain on others is never delivered from hatred.

Dhammapada 21.291

WHERE MEDITATION MEETS MORALITY

Here are comments from meditation teacher Bruce Stewart writing to Vipassana practitioners at Donaldson Correctional Facility in Alabama. They appear in the book Letters from the Dhamma Brothers, published by Pariyatti, a non-profit publisher in Washington State. The book reveals dozens of letters between meditating prisoners and meditation teachers. These letters help us see how it is possible to meditate even in difficult circumstances, and to realize the remarkable positive change that meditation can make in one's life.

1. I'm pleased that you continue to meditate at least twice a day, and very happy that it may be as much as three or four times. Meditate as much as you are able; it will give you great strength.
2. Any community service you do is a wonderful thing. Doing humble and selfless service will do most of all fulfill your paramis (noble qualities). I was just reading about Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, who is known for doing simple and often mundane service for others. This all helps break the attachment to the notion of "I, me, mine."
3. It is wonderful that you no longer support prison contraband. As you meditate more, your understanding of sila (morality) becomes deeper, and naturally some inappropriate actions just fall away.
4. Your description of your dream was moving. Yes, metta (loving kindness) will fill you in different ways as you both give and receive it.
5. If you have a chance, please encourage your Dhamma brothers to keep up their practice. As I've said in the past, it only works when you practice it; otherwise, it is just a good memory. Incrementally, and according to one's past paramis, the path will reveal itself. Have no doubt!
6. I strongly encourage you to keep up your practice. From what I gather, you are managing to do this, but it must be difficult for you. While it is ideal to sit together in a group, it is not absolutely necessary. Remember, the Dhamma is inside! No one can take this away from you. As the Buddha says, "you have to make an island unto yourself."
7. Always remember, even in the toughest of times: everything is changing. The apparent solidity of storms and prison life melodrama are also changing – nothing is permanent – it will all pass away. With constant practice the illusion of "I, me, mine" slowly gets shattered by the deep understanding and wisdom of anicca (impermanence). This is all based solely on one's own experience. This is the beauty and power of Dhamma...





Here is the closing address by Vipassana teacher S. N. Goenka at the Seminar on Vipassana for Relief from Addictions & Better Health, held at Dhamma Giri meditation center in India in 1989. It was first published in the Vipassana Research International newsletter, Vol. 9 No. 1, on January 2, 1999.

When we talk of addiction, it is not merely to alcohol or to drugs, but also to passion, to anger, to fear, to egotism: all of these are addictions. All are addictions to your impurities. At the intellectual level you understand very well, “Anger is not good for me. It is dangerous. It is so harmful.” Yet you are addicted to anger; you keep generating anger. And when the anger is over, you keep repeating, “Oh! I should not have generated anger. I should not have generated anger.” Meaningless! The next time some stimulation comes, you again become angry.

You are not coming out of it, because you have not been working at the depth of the behavior pattern of your mind. The anger starts because a particular chemical has started flowing in your body, and with the interaction of mind and matter – one influencing the other – the anger continues to multiply. By practicing this technique, you start observing the sensation which has arisen because of the flow of a particular chemical. You do not react to it. This means you do not generate anger at that particular moment. This one moment turns into a few moments, which turn into a few seconds, which turn into a few minutes, and you find that you are not as easily influenced by this flow as you were in the past. You have slowly started coming out of your anger.

People who have come to these courses go back home and apply this technique in their daily life. They do this by meditating morning and evening, and by continuing to observe themselves in different situations; how they react or how they remain equanimous to these situations. The first thing they will try to do is to observe the sensation. Because of the particular situation, maybe a part of the mind has started reacting, but by observing the sensation their minds become equanimous. Then whatever action they take is an action; it is not a reaction. Action is always positive. It is only when they react that they generate negativity and become miserable. A few moments observing the sensation makes the mind equanimous and then it can act. Life then is full of action instead of reaction.

This practice morning and evening – and making use of this technique in daily life – starts to change the behavior pattern. Those who used to roll in anger for a long time find their anger becomes less. When anger comes it cannot

last for long, because it is not intense. Similarly, those who are addicted to passion find the passion becomes weaker and weaker. Those who are addicted to fear find their fear becomes weaker and weaker. Different kinds of impurities take different amounts of time to come out of. Whether it takes a long time or a short time, the technique will work provided it is used properly.

Whether you are addicted to craving, or aversion, or hatred, or passion, or fear, the addiction is to a particular sensation that has arisen because of the biochemical flow. This type of matter results in reaction at the mental level, and the reaction at the mental level again turns into this bio-chemical reaction. When you say you are addicted, you are actually addicted to the sensation. It takes time to feel sensations, to go to the root of the problem. When you get addicted to liquor, or addicted to drugs, you cannot know the reality of what is happening within the framework of the body.

We keep advising people who are addicted to tobacco that if an urge arises in the mind, not to take the cigarette and start smoking. Wait a little. Just accept the fact that an urge to smoke has arisen in the mind. When this urge arises, along with it there is a sensation in the body. Start observing that sensation, whatever the sensation may be. Do not look for a particular sensation. Any sensation at that time in the body is related to the urge to smoke. And by observing the sensation as impermanent, anicca, it arises, it passes, it arises, it passes and in ten minutes, fifteen minutes, this urge will pass away. This is not a philosophy but the experiential truth.

Similarly for those who are addicted to alcohol or addicted to drugs, when an urge arises, we advise them not to succumb immediately, just wait ten or fifteen minutes, and accept the fact that an urge has arisen and observe whatever sensation is present at that time. And they have found that they are coming out of their addictions. They may not be successful every time, but if they are successful even one time out of ten, a very good beginning is made because the root has started changing. The habit pattern lies at the root of the mind, and the root of the mind is strongly related to the sensations on the body: mind and matter are so inter-related, they keep on influencing each other.

May you all come out of all your addictions. Not merely addiction to drugs or alcohol: the addiction to the mental impurities is stronger than these. It has been with you for so many lives; a very strong behaviour pattern, which you have to break to come out of your misery. It is a big job. A big responsibility. And you are not doing it to oblige anybody; not to please any God Almighty, not to please your teacher. You are doing it to oblige yourself; for your own good, for your own benefit, for your own liberation.

And the process is such that when you start to benefit from the meditation technique, from the path, you cannot resist helping others. It is then not merely for your own good, but for the benefit, liberation, and good of so many. So many people are suffering all around: may they all come in contact with pure Dhamma and come out of their misery. May they start enjoying peace and harmony; the peace and harmony of the liberated mind, liberated from all the defilements.





Harry Snyder, one of the co-founders of the North American Vipassana Prison Trust, has died at age 85. Harry spent his life making the world a better place. He headed Peace Corps offices in India, Western Samoa, and Nepal, working with staff and diplomats to support education, small business, and farmers. Returning to the U.S., he spent decades working as a consumer and public health advocate, striving to make the country more fair and just.

His San Francisco Chronicle obituary said that he fought for “the marginalized and underrepresented” and that he “sought tougher regulations on utilities, insurers and business interests, institutions he frequently charged with fear-mongering and gouging.”

In 2018, Snyder sat down for a series of interviews about meditation and his work conducting courses in prisons. Here is an excerpt, which starts with Harry talking about when S.N. Goenka first talked to him and his wife Vivian about setting up a prison trust to conduct courses.

I asked Goenka some specific questions. Part of it was outreach: how would we get into prisons? Another was, would it be paid for by dana (donations)? Goenka was very specific. He had a good organizational mind, and always knew where he was going with something.

When he asked us to help set up the trust, we looked at each other and said, “Yes, we will do this.” We respected Goenka tremendously, and his mission, and made it ours: to help people learn meditation as he taught it. Vivian and I were a team and worked closely together. And we had gratitude for what he taught us.

I did not know anything about Corrections, but did this for three reasons. First, Vivian and I had made a sincere promise to Goenka that we would assist him in the spread of Dhamma. Second, I saw it as a challenge of taking on something new. Third, I wanted to be able to help prisoners.

Harry then talked about some of the differences between prison courses and free world courses...

People outside have heard about courses from family or friends, or read about it online, so have some confidence that the course will be helpful. Inside, most people are distrustful. Some will not want to sit with anyone behind them – or close their eyes with anybody around them. The teacher wants to know what’s actually going on with each student, all the better to help. But they likely will not talk about themselves in an honest way if anyone else is around.

At the beginning, most wouldn’t sign up to do an interview with the teacher, because in front of others that would look needy. To overcome that, we came up with the protocol that everyone in prison gets an interview every day or every couple of days. And we have maintained that.

Some students may be there because they have heard the food is better on a course, or that it’s quieter. Or they may be thinking, “If I do this course, maybe something good will go into my file.” There can be different kinds of motivations.

Most people taking Vipassana courses in prison do so because they want to change their lives. And eventually they do engage in serious conversation with the teacher. When this happened, Harry says...

It marked a point at which they trusted the teacher and the teaching, and felt safe in the environment they were in. I’m sure it helped them become more serious at meditation – and get more out of it.

There was a feeling of safety and being understood. This was not a psychiatric process but came up because on the course they were isolated. And meditating seriously.