

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WORDS OF DHAMMA

If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness,
let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater.

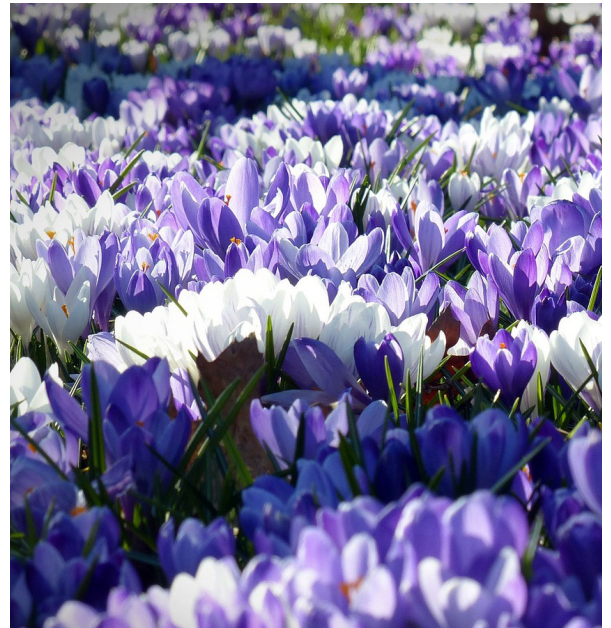
Dhammapada 21.290

UNDERSTANDING IMPERMANENCE IS PART OF MEDITATION

Students are free to ask teachers questions at Vipassana centers around the world. The following questions and answers appeared in the March and November 2017 California Vipassana Center newsletters.

Question: When I'm meditating and observing my sensations, I sometimes stop at a gross sensation and just observe it a little longer. I don't remember why I do this. Is this a correct way to practice?

Answer: When you're working part by part, it's okay to pause and spend a little longer at gross sensations. Do so with the idea of giving yourself more time to observe the boundaries of the sensation, where the center of it is, etc. – all with the understanding of anicca, which we also call impermanence. It is often difficult to perceive that the gross sensations are an indication of change; spending a little longer there can help to observe this better. But never stay longer than a minute or two. And if your mind is too distracted by staying there, stay for less time. If you are working simultaneously through the body, or working with a flow, don't stop to observe the gross sensations. Only do this when you're working part by part.



Question: I have asthma. In the week after my last 10-day course, the symptoms of wheezing and shortness of breath have been increasing. Last night, I had to go to the emergency room for an emergency, and they prescribed medications. Usually, I avoid taking any medications. I have an inhaler that I use periodically, but that is all. I have been keeping up with my twice daily sittings and keeping with the five precepts. Any advice would be appreciated.

Answer: Sorry to hear of your asthma attack. I am confident in saying that Vipassana practice or your recent course activity has nothing to do with either precipitating or adversely affecting this attack. I would also advise you to follow your doctor's advice regarding treatment. Where Vipassana can help is in training you to remain calm and less agitated when passing through any stressful situation. I think that medical treatment is made more effective when the patient does not complicate the illness with unnecessary agitation and worry.

Strengthening yourself with a regular daily practice can only help at times like this. Be sure you are practicing as properly as you can, recalling the fundamentals of developing awareness and balance of mind. Use breath awareness as and when necessary. And bear in mind the impermanence of each and every experience you encounter, as you move your attention within the body, feeling sensations. When and if worry or fear or doubt arise, realize there is simultaneously a bodily sensation also arising. By definition this appearance and disappearance is impermanent. This will keep you grounded in all situations. Best wishes for a return to good health.

"YOU WILL SHINE BRIGHTLY" – VIPASSANA TEACHER HAS MESSAGE FOR PRISONERS

Teacher S. N. Goenka, who first brought the technique of Vipassana meditation from India to North America, visited Donaldson Correctional Facility in Alabama on May 16, 2002. While there he spoke to the prisoners, COs, and Donaldson administrators who had gathered in the West Gym. Some of his comments were focused towards the inmate students who had just finished a 10-day meditation course. In other remarks he considered a challenge that all of us, as human beings, share.

I am so glad, so glad to be with you all this morning. I was informed by your teacher that this course was very successful, because you all worked very hard. One has to work very hard to get good results.

But this is just the beginning. It is a long path. You have taken the first step. The longest journey starts with the first step. You have taken the first step – the right step, on the right path, in the right direction. Whatever you gained by these 10 days of meditation is just the beginning – to convince you that, “Yes, I am on the right path, I have taken the right step in the right direction.”

Now you have to keep strengthening yourselves. Whatever purity you have attained, that should not only be maintained, but it must be increased, developed. Understand, you have a great responsibility now. What you have learned

here in 10 days, use it to strengthen yourself. Because you were able to eradicate even a small amount of negativity from your mind, a very good beginning has been made. And now you know the technique – how to liberate yourself from negativities, how to liberate yourself from misery. The more you practice, the more strength you will get. This will be more fruitful for you.

You all understand that what you have practiced is not a rite or a ritual. It is an exercise. You do physical exercise to keep your body, healthy and strong. Now you have learned this mental exercise to keep your mind healthy, strong, wholesome and happy. I have worked with thousands of prisoners, and I know what great suffering they experience. Due to whatever crime they have committed, small or big, they are kept away from their family. They are kept away from all the comforts of family life. That itself is a great misery.



But a bigger prison is the prison of one's behavior pattern. Deep inside, everyone is a prisoner of his unwholesome behavior patterns at the depth of the mind. Without knowing what one is doing, one continues generating some negativity or the other: "When I get out of jail, I will take revenge. I will teach a lesson to so-and-so. I will do this, I will do that." All kinds of anger, hatred, aversion.

By doing this meditation technique one starts realizing, "What am I doing? Every time I generate negativity, look, I am the first victim of my negativity. I have become so miserable, so miserable." No one wants to make himself miserable. Yet, out of ignorance, you keep making yourself miserable. And now you realize: "I've got a wonderful technique to come out of this misery." Your fellow prisoners, here, they are suffering from both these miseries – the misery of being kept away from their families, and the misery of generating negativities in their minds. So have compassion towards your fellow prisoners here.

After doing this meditation course, your behavior will be watched by so many people outside. Every government thinks that if we punish a criminal, he will be all right. But we have to help the person who made a mistake in the spur of the moment. Help him come out of negativity, come out of unwholesome action, both vocal and physical. All the state governments of this country, all the governments of different countries, will be inspired to help prisoners. Show them that there is a way out, a practical way that gives results here, and now. And this meditation technique is such a scientific way – rational, pragmatic. So many people around the world will be benefited.

Initially courses were given in an Indian prison. And when the result was so good, some of the jail superintendents told me, "I can't believe this person was such a hardened criminal. How has he become a saintly person? I can't believe it. But this is the fact. Such a big change has come." Such words start spreading.

So this is a very big responsibility that you are carrying. You are now living a better life, more peaceful and more harmonious. I keep telling people that those who are behind walls are not the only prisoners. Everyone outside this wall is also a prisoner – a prisoner of his own unwholesome behavior patterns of the mind. People have to come out of that – come out of the prison, get liberated. I am sure you will be the carriers of the message. You will shine brightly. People will look at you and say, "Look, what a big change has come." That will inspire so many suffering people – behind the walls and outside the walls.

I am sure whatever benefits you have gained during these 10 days, if you keep growing in a Dhamma life, you will become a very good example to miserable people all around the world. May all of you keep growing in Dhamma. May you live a happy life, a peaceful life, a harmonious life – good for you and good for so many others.



This poem is written by Paul R. and Susan K. Fleischman, two Vipassana teachers in Massachusetts. It appears in “The Spirit of the Buddha”, a video collection of prose poems published by Pariyatti Press. The Fleischmans told Pariyatti that “all of these compositions combine the Buddha’s thoughts with contemporary phrasing... are brief, poetic, re-speaking some of the Buddha’s most important ideas. They are sparks from the campfire that continue to glow in the dark.”



Using Fear

All people feel fear.

Even the Buddha, before his enlightenment, had to struggle.

He said: I used to live in the jungle, surrounded by feelings of anxiety.

Wild animals would approach, or the wind would shake the trees.

Every time a branch fell I shuddered.

I thought to myself, why do I live constantly expecting bad things to happen?

It was true, that while I walked in the jungle worry and foreboding followed me;

when I stood still

worry and foreboding surrounded me like a cloud;

when I lay down worry and foreboding covered me,

and when I sat down to meditate,

worry and foreboding hovered like mist.

We are told that due to his fear,

the Buddha became determined to arouse tireless energy

in unremitting effort to gain insight into his suffering.

He concentrated his mind, he established mindfulness,

and slowly, and with great effort,

his mind became purified, bright, under his control, malleable,

like properly heated gold, like the sword he used to carry,

steady and imperturbable

like a Buddha.

The first true knowledge he attained was the realization of equanimity.

It was his fear that goaded him towards liberation.