



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XLVII • FALL 2023

WORDS OF DHAMMA

Difficult to detect and very subtle, the mind seizes whatever it wants;
so let a wise one guard one's mind, for a guarded mind brings happiness.

Dhammapada 3.36

HOLDING THE KEYS TO A SMOOTH AND PEACEFUL DEATH

In his remarkable book "Realizing Change: Vipassana Meditation in Action," British Vipassana teacher Ian Hetherington contemplates many touchy subjects. One of the most sensitive, naturally, is death. "Realizing Change" is published by Pariyatti Press. Here is an excerpt.



Of all the changes waiting for us, death is the greatest. Since birth, it has infused our existence with meaning. But mostly we avoid looking directly at that situation, when "I" will cease to be. When the body gives way, and the mind goes out. When every possession is left behind and every desire is swept aside. Perhaps tomorrow, or in thirty years, we will die. Are we ready? Whenever it comes, will we rise to the occasion, meeting our end consciously and harmoniously, with all the wisdom of a lifetime? Nothing is more natural than dying, we know, part of an ageless cycle. Yet how easy to lose perspective when someone dear passes away or we miss something precious. Grief reminds us of our own immortality: "I am not forever."

Practicing Vipassana, we engage in an ongoing process of learning. Body and mind rise and pass with each breath and every sensation. Repeatedly probing this truth within ourselves, we begin to accept it. Impermanence as felt experience dissolves the tendency to cling to what is "ours." Kindness and giving displace self-centeredness. Living a full and wholesome life, we prepare to make a good death.

Here is a real life example... An experienced meditator found out that he had cancer one July; he died the next January. During his illness, every time that he had a setback – which happened quite often, Vipassana helped him to restore his balance of mind. His son was able to observe him closely during the final period of his life. "I think Dhamma was protecting him," the son said. "That was a very profound effect that we could see, even in the last stages.

"Whenever we said, 'do you want to meditate?,' he would just nod his head, so all of us would sit around him and try to send metta for twenty or thirty minutes. "At one time he was fighting the disease, hopeful, as we all were, that he would get a couple more years, then a couple more months, couple more weeks. But at some point it probably just dawned on him that now he didn't have too much time. And he just accepted that, and along with it (let go) the attachment to this life.

"Probably because of that his death was so smooth and so peaceful. Because there was no fighting, no struggle."

DON'T LET A SCRATCH BECOME A FESTERING WOUND

Human beings have struggled with the same problems for thousands of years. One is that a few unwise words, mixed with ego and pride, can become a huge problem. Australian Vipassana teacher Patrick Given-Wilson considered this in a talk he presented in Victoria, Australia, on November 27, 2022. This is an excerpt of that talk, which was published in the Pariyatti Journal on June 20, 2023.

In the 1980s, when S.N. Goenka was first appointing assistant teachers, he was asked about the qualities needed for this position. His answer surprised me. He could have said, “The person must have deep meditation, must have a good understanding of Dhamma...” – all those kinds of things. But he didn’t. He said the most important thing was for an AT to not develop or nurture a group of students who would admire him, support him whatever he does, and follow him everywhere. In other words, no groupism. If an AT is trying to do that, they are not practicing Dhamma.

An incident illustrates how dangerous groupism can be. The story happened during the Buddha’s lifetime at Kosambi, a provincial capital on the Ganges River. In a monastery were two senior monks. One was the meditation teacher. He taught meditation, gave the discourses, and had a group who followed him. The other was the preceptor, who was responsible for discipline in the monastery. He would induct new monks and make sure that discipline was being maintained. He had his own following.

It all started with a trivial incident. One day, the meditation teacher went to the bathroom. A pitcher of water was always there for washing oneself and flushing the toilet. It was meant to be refilled and left for the next person. The teacher forgot to refill the pitcher.

The next person in the bathroom was the preceptor. After using the toilet, he noticed that the pitcher was not full. So he went to the teacher and asked, “Were you the last person in the bathroom?”

The teacher said yes.

“Do you realize you didn’t refill the pitcher of water?”

“It was unintentional. I didn’t realize. I forgot.”

“Do you realize that’s an offence, not to refill the water?”

“I’ll make amends for it.”

“But if it was unintentional, then it’s not an offence.”

“Good,” said the teacher. “That’s fine.”

So far so good. The preceptor had gone directly to the teacher. They sorted it out – and should have been the end of the story. But then the wrong speech started.

The preceptor went to his followers and said something different from what he said to the teacher. Instead, he said, “This teacher has committed an offence, and is not admitting it! This is very wrong!” The preceptor’s group then went to the teacher’s group and said, “Your teacher went to the toilet, committed this offence, and he’s not admitting to it!” Of course, the teacher’s group told the teacher what the preceptor was saying.

The teacher was very upset and said, “The preceptor told me that because it was unintentional, it’s not an offence. He’s a liar!” The teacher’s students reported this back to the preceptor’s students. Thus, a trivial incident got blown up. Then it got worse. The preceptor said, “The teacher has committed an offence, and is not admitting it, which is a worse offence. I am going to pronounce a sentence of excommunication.” The preceptor declared that the teacher was no longer a monk, could no longer live in the monastery, and had to leave. A sentence of excommunication was



passed, which the preceptor was entitled to do. But the teacher's students didn't accept it. Now the two groups of monks in the monastery were fighting and arguing. An ancient text says they were "stabbing each other with verbal daggers." It even came to physical blows.

One of the monks went to the Buddha, who was staying nearby, and told him what was going on. The Buddha sent a message back: "Stop quarrelling, stop arguing." But they didn't listen. So the Buddha personally went to the monastery where he gave them a dhamma talk with this message: stop quarrelling. At the end of the talk, one monk got up and said, "Sir, enjoy the fruits of your meditation. We'll sort this out." In other words, he was telling the Buddha to go away! The Buddha tried again by giving another discourse – the same thing happened.



By now, the Buddha was repulsed by this unwholesome behaviour. The next morning he walked out of the monastery completely, uttering a famous verse, "If you don't have good companions, it's better to be on your own." He went to the nearby forest. He spent the entire season happily in the forest, meditating. Meanwhile, the monks were still quarrelling...

By this time householders in Kosambi realized the Buddha had gone. They went to the monks and asked what had happened. The monks told them, "We've had an argument. The Buddha asked us to stop arguing. We didn't stop, so he left." The householders were disgusted. They went away and agreed among themselves. "Because these monks are quarrelling so much, we will no longer pay respects nor feed them!" The next day, the monks went out with their begging bowls, but no food was offered. No one even paid them any attention. And they were stuck – since it was the rainy season, they couldn't travel. The next day, they went out again, but still no food was offered to them. And that continued to happen each day, which brought them to their senses.

They went back and said, "We've patched it up now." But the householders asked, "Have you sought the Buddha's pardon?" They replied, "No, we can't. He is in the forest somewhere. We don't know where he is. And we are not permitted to leave the monastery until the end of the rainy season." The householders said, "Well, we're not going to feed you!" So a very uncomfortable season passed for these monks, who came close to starvation.

After the rainy season the monks, now contrite and upset, went to visit the Buddha to apologize for their shameful behavior. When the local king heard that the monks would on the move he told the Buddha, "I will not let these monks pass through my kingdom!" But the Buddha said, "No. Let them. They're coming to seek pardon."

By now, the meditation teacher had come to his senses. He understood that he had committed an offence and the preceptor was right. He went to his group, admitted the offence, and said that the sentence of expulsion was correct. He asked them to rehabilitate him. Then the meditation teacher and his group went to the Buddha and told him the whole story. Then they went to the other group and said, "Our teacher realized that he's made a mistake. We've rehabilitated him. Let's go to the Buddha, all of us, and perform a reunification." This they did, and then the whole story was over. The Buddha gave them a discourse, and after that they all progressed very well.

So that is how dangerous wrong speech can be. And in this story, too, we see how to make amends.

FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS, AND SEE JOYFUL CHANGE

Vipassana students ask their teachers questions at meditation courses all around the world. Some of the meditation centers then publish some of the questions and answers, so that readers as well may benefit. These questions and answers appeared in the California Vipassana Center Newsletter in June and July 2023.

Question: When doing Anapana meditation, should I keep my eyes focused on the area below my nose? Or do I just observe the breath below my nose with the feeling only?



Answer: It is better not to keep your eyes focused on the area below the nostrils when you are practicing Anapana. As the teacher S.N. Goenka says, the eyes have no function when meditating. It can cause tension and headaches, so just keep the eyes in a neutral position. It is important, though, to be aware of the direction of the breath when practicing Anapana: knowing it is coming in when coming in, and going out when going out. Keep your awareness below the nostrils and above the upper lip, but do not have your eyes directed there.

Question: How does the ego get dissolved just by observing sensations and trying to be equanimous? When I face problems in real life (mainly due to my ego), how can I make use of my practice? The pain caused by my ego bruises in real life don't translate to a body sensation.

Answer: The essence of Vipassana is the cultivation of the truth of impermanence. This is the basis for equanimity. The more you realize this truth of impermanence, the more you are changing your ego-centric behavior from selfishness to selflessness. Your practice is how you can accomplish this change of mind. It's important to realize that you are not merely practicing body sensations; you are actually changing the habit of your mind to blindly react. This blind habit pattern is intimately tied up with ego – and its attachment to opinions and views. Unchecked ego makes us miserable.

Give yourself a break and don't expect ego to be immediately erased by your practice. It takes time and it's a long path. Focus on the essentials of Vipassana practice: morality, concentration with an object of reality and the wisdom that results from the diminishing of ignorance and see for yourself how your ego is gradually being replaced by genuine love.

Question: What are we supposed to do during metta meditation? The instructions say "relax yourself." I don't understand that. Are we not supposed to observe sensations during that time? Are we supposed to listen and "try to feel" love towards others? It feels artificial to me.

Answer: In doing metta, first we examine ourselves to see if there are any unpleasant sensations in the body or negative thoughts in the mind. If there are, we relax and allow these sensations and thoughts to subside. Then, if there subtle sensations anywhere in the body, we fill these sensations with love and compassion.

When doing Vipassana meditation we don't use visualization or imagination, but metta is totally different. When practicing metta we can imagine the feelings of goodwill and kindness, to fill ourselves and then radiate outward. We can mentally send these to specific individuals and to all beings. For some meditators, metta doesn't come easily but, as with Vipassana, it takes practice. Metta practice helps us diminish ego and develop loving kindness. It is vitally important to a meditator's practice and yields great benefits.