



# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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## WORDS OF DHAMMA

Think not lightly of good, saying, "It will not come to me." Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.

*Dhammapada 9.122*

## HOW TO AVOID BEING MISERABLE

*Learning to meditate can be confusing. For this reason, Vipassana students are encouraged to ask their teachers questions at meditation courses all around the world. The following questions and answers were published by the Vipassana Research Institute, which is based in India. No doubt students in many other countries have had similar concerns, and likewise received wise advice.*

Student: If someone is purposely making your life miserable, how do you tolerate this?

Teacher: First of all, don't try to change the other person. Try to change yourself. Someone is trying to make you miserable – but you are becoming miserable because you are reacting to this. If you learn how to observe your reaction, then nobody can make you miserable. Any amount of misery from others cannot make you miserable if you learn to be equanimous deep inside. Vipassana will help you. And once you become free from misery inside, this will start affecting others. The same person who was harming, you will start changing a little by little.



Student: What if the mind remains full of thoughts and is unable to keep in one place?

Teacher: We are here to meditate for precisely that reason. If the mind was already concentrated, then why would we come here? It is an old habit of the mind to wander. Let it wander. The moment we realize the mind has wandered, we bring it back to the breath. The mind is distracted because of innumerable thoughts. The nature of these thoughts varies from time to time – but the important thing is how soon we become conscious of the fact that the mind has wandered. It is not good if the mind remains distracted for a long period of time.

Student: How can doing anapana meditation help reform the mind?

Teacher: As long as the mind is doing anapana – that is, observing the flow of respiration – it is without any thoughts. As a result, it is without any defilements. It is our thoughts that defile the mind. Mostly, while we are thinking, there is craving or aversion. Pleasant thoughts generate craving, and unpleasant thoughts generate aversion. But when we are observing the incoming and outgoing of breath, there is no reason for us to generate either of these emotions. So these are moments of purity in the mind. More and more of these moments of purity will reverse the habit pattern of the mind. The mind that was previously generating impurities will now become pure. This transformation, which initially takes place at the surface level of the mind, will gradually take deep roots as you progress on the path of Vipassana.

## WHAT IS TRUE, AND WHAT IS MERELY CREATED IN THE MIND?

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*Yuval Noah Harari is one of the most influential intellectuals in the world. He is also a Vipassana meditator. In April 2023, Canadian author and meditator Kory Goldberg interviewed Harari; a transcript of their conversation was published in the online Pariyatti Journal. Here is an excerpt.*

Q: What brought you to Vipassana? How did you come to your first course?

Yuval Noah Harari: I did my first course in 2000. I was in the middle of my PhD at Oxford, studying history, and also in the middle of some kind of existential crisis. Despite my best efforts, I just couldn't figure life out. I didn't understand what was happening in the world, why there was so much suffering, or what could be done about it.

I was very deep into intellectual studies, not just history, which is my field, but also philosophy and religion. And with each passing year, it became more and more apparent that it was hopeless, that it was absolutely impossible for humans, or at least for me personally, to understand the meaning of life in any real way. And then a friend nagged me for about a year to take a Vipassana course. I thought it was some kind of mystical nonsense, so didn't want to go. But truthfully, I had no idea what meditation actually was. However, because my crisis was so deep, and my friend persisted, I finally gave in.

After only the second day, I was completely awestruck. It was so far from the mystical mumbo jumbo that I had expected. I felt that it was the most scientific, rigorous practice that I had ever encountered. I wasn't asked to believe in or accept anything. The instruction was simply to directly observe what is happening right now. By the evening of the second day, I was convinced that if there really was a way to understand reality, then this was the way.

Q: How do you fit meditation into your life?

YNH: For me, meditation is the first priority, because it's the basis for everything else I do. Normally, the first thing I do every day is meditate for one hour, and then usually again in the afternoon, like around three or four o'clock. I also sit a long course (of 20 or more days) every year, and find time to serve at least two 10-day courses, sometimes three, sometimes even more. Contrary to what people might think, I'm actually not a very busy person. <laughter> I know lots of people who are far busier than me. I have a friend who's a single mom raising two kids by herself. She's a very busy person; I'm not in her league.

Q: In your book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, you write, "Terrorism is both a global political problem and an internal psychological mechanism." To me, this quote calls attention to the ways in which the Buddha's three unwholesome roots, also known as the three poisons—craving, aversion and ignorance—might appear as collective and even structural problems. Would you comment on this?

YNH: I think that insight into ourselves, into our own minds, is very important on the personal level. But of course, potentially, it also has implications for how we understand other people, how we understand society, and even lengthy historical processes. Questions of war and terrorism often go back to some very basic beliefs that people have about humanity: Are humans essentially bad, or essentially good? And where does violence come from? Some people believe that violence is an inherent feature of humans, that it's some kind of law of nature. As a historian, I think this is completely wrong. As a meditator, I also think this is completely wrong.





Being a historian, I look at history. I see there are periods that are much more peaceful than others, because people manage to build better institutions and better cultures. And it's the same in my own mind. Sometimes anger arises, I feed it and it becomes worse and worse, and it can spill over into hatred and external violence. It's not that there's a permanent level of hatred or fear or anger in the mind.

Similarly, with terrorism, which above all is a psychological weapon. Terrorists are usually very weak groups. They'd like to take over a territory or country, but they can't because they don't have an army. Instead, they stage a terrifying spectacle of violence. And people see it, especially in today's world of modern media, again and again and again.

A terrorist kills ten people, and a hundred million people start to fear that there's a terrorist behind every tree. Very often this fear creates far more damage than what the terrorists can do directly by their actions. In recent decades, entire countries have been destroyed, collapsing into violence, because of an overreaction to terrorism. I'm not implying that one shouldn't do anything – just observe, let the terrorists kill people. Of course not. One needs to take action; but not overreact. The action should be astute.

But very often, because now you have a hundred million people afraid of terrorism, governments find they have to stage their own spectacles of mass violence in order to assure their citizens: "Don't worry, we're defending you." But we need to remain realistic, and not allow the terrorists to hijack our imaginations and turn our minds against us. We need to remind ourselves, "Yes, this is terrible. A terrorist has killed ten people – but that doesn't mean there are terrorists around every corner, that we should be biased against an entire people or attack entire countries." No, we should have a balanced response. This is our responsibility.

Q: So we need to truly understand the difference between a real tiger and a paper tiger, to know what's a rational fear and what's merely created in our own minds?

YNH: Yes. It goes back to the question that we often ask ourselves in meditation. What is really happening right now? If you see a terrorist in action on television and your mind starts running wild with all kinds of terrible scenarios, you need to stop and ask yourself, "Wait a minute. What is really happening? These scenarios in my mind, am I creating them?" Yes, it's certainly terrible that a terrorist kills ten people, but this is not the same as what I create in my mind. So, let's go back to reality.

This is what we do in meditation.



## FIRST CAME FEAR. THEN CAME INSIGHT.

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*Fear is a frightening sensation. Like any unwanted sensation, however – we can learn from it. And learning how fear works can help us not be afraid.*

*In this poem, the Massachusetts Vipassana teacher Paul Fleischman takes a fresh look at our old enemy, fear. This poem, *Using Fear*, was published in the *Pariyatti Journal* on Nov. 23, 2022.*



### 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.

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

It was his fear that goaded him towards liberation.