



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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WISE WORDS

Hate brings great misfortune, hate churns up and harms the mind;
this fearful danger deep within, most people do not understand.

Itivuttaka 3.88

KEEP THE TORCH ALIGHT – 50 YEARS OF VIPASSANA NEWSLETTERS

The first Vipassana newsletter in North America was published in April 1974, 50 years ago. Today many Vipassana newsletters are published, some in print and others online. They include regular newsletters published by meditation centers in Georgia, Massachusetts, California, Illinois, Delaware, and British Columbia. The April 1974 newsletter was four short pages. Here are some of its highlights, beginning with a welcoming letter from an unsigned meditator ...

Be happy! The Dhamma is flourishing in the West at last! In many parts of North America, Vipassana meditators are coming together with high levels of energy and enthusiasm for organizing courses and beginning plans for establishing centers. The Vipassana Newsletter has come into being to spread information; that is, all the people should know about all the courses (and the various meditation houses as they sprout) in all the places. If you wish to attend a course, write directly to the course organizer for more information.

On the next page, Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka had a brief message. It started:

Dear travellers on the path of Dhamma! Be happy! Keep the torch of Dhamma alight! Let it shine brightly in all your actions of daily life! ALWAYS REMEMBER: Dhamma is not an escape! It is an art of living; living in peace and harmony, with one's own self and also with all others. Hence, try to live Dhamma life.

On the final page was logistical information:

Although several courses are tentative at this time, the following are definite:

5-12 May – Conway, Mass.

11-22 June – Midland, Texas

On S.N. Goenka's schedule of courses to be given in English, the following is definite:
11-21 May – K.J. Somiya College Hostel,
in Bombay

If you wish your name to be removed from the mailing list for the Vipassana Newsletter, or know a friend who wishes to be added, just write and it will happen. Also most welcome are address corrections.



Although the Newsletter is mailed from California, this particular issue was put together in the Midwest with the help of persons from many regions. There will be several issues per year and the mailing list currently consists of almost 1,000 meditators around the USA and Canada. Be happy! Do send in any Dhamma news from your area. This year 6 May is the Full Moon in May, the day on which Theravada countries celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. A nice day for a group sitting, no?

PRISON DIRECTOR TRIED MEDITATION, REALIZED ITS VALUE

How do Vipassana meditation courses take place in prison? It involves a lot of caring people: meditators outside the prison, administrators inside the prison, and the prisoners themselves. Sometimes a warden or corrections official will sit a Vipassana course in one of the 19 Vipassana centers in the U.S. and Canada. After sitting for 10 days, they realize how a course would benefit everyone inside.

Sometimes wardens have heard of the goodness of meditation courses from family, or friends, or from a prison trust (a group of people who volunteer to help make prison courses happen). If the warden invites the prison trust to visit, one or two people will go in. The expected benefits of a course may be discussed; so, too, logistical considerations. Ultimately, of course, prison courses do take place in prison. This has happened in 20 countries around the world. And it has been happening with impressive regularity in Brazil. Here are some notes from a member of the Vipassana prison trust in that country. They talk about the first two prison courses in Brazil and the first one after the lull of Covid: how these courses came about and how much they helped.

April 2018: Minas Gerais

In April 2018 the first Vipassana prison course in Brazil was held at the Ribeirao das Neves Correctional Facility, in the state of Minas Gerais. Participants received white trousers and T-shirts to wear, instead of their usual red prison uniforms. Their daily routine was changed for 10 days; in silence, they worked to calm down and improve their minds. First they did this by observing the breath coming in and out. Later, with closed eyes, they focused on their own normal, natural, physical sensations. The first course took place after the prison director himself, Rodrigo Gaiga, attended a 10-day course in 2017. Gaiga realized that Vipassana could be a powerful rehabilitation tool. He convinced his superiors to allow the course, with all the necessary conditions: a separate prison wing dedicated to the course, preparation of vegetarian meals, and acquisition of meditation cushions, among other details.

After the course ended, one student said, “What we faced here was a battle, but it was worth it. I learned how to deal with my problems and manage anxiety and physical pain.” Another said, “I continue to meditate every day in my cell. I have learned that all suffering is caused by attachment and that nothing remains as it is. I am in jail now, but that will change. I started to feel comfortable enough to reflect, and that calms me down.” One of the servers of the first course offered this insight: “The walls are not the prison’s. The real bondage is inside the mind. And so is liberation.” And the course teacher had this to say: “This whole process of observing reality, of allowing impurities to rise to the surface and disappear – this whole process leads to four qualities manifesting in people. These qualities are love, compassion, joy and equanimity.”



August 2018: Sao Paulo

Meanwhile, in that same year, 2018, in the state of Sao Paulo, a 10-day course was being planned at the Potim Correctional Facility II. A Vipassana student was a volunteer there, and had a close acquaintance with Dr. Sueli Zeraik de Oliveira Armani, a state judge. Potim Correctional Facility was chosen for having the right conditions for

the course, and because of the welcoming reaction of its director, Dr. Gustavo Testa Fernandes. There were several weeks of preparation. Inmates watched the documentaries "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" and "The Dhamma Brothers," and attended question and answer sessions and Anapana meditation sessions. Banners were stuck to the prison walls informing everyone of courses being held in prisons around the world. Finally, the first course in Sao Paulo was held in August 2018. Nineteen men started the course, and 18 completed it.

Of the 18 prisoners who completed all 10 days, one was released at the end of the course. This was announced by the judge at the closing ceremony. A group of outside meditators committed to going back inside the prison once a month, to host one-day Vipassana courses for the meditators inside. Three months later, 12 of the inmates were still meditating two hours a day, and 1-day courses were being held once a month or more. That first course in Potim was documented in the film "Silence Island," directed by Germán Perez. The documentary invites us to know, through the words of participants, the profound changes of consciousness that they experienced during ten days of silence and introspection. It also shows us what it is like to experience a meditation course in a maximum-security

prison. This documentary is available on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/398280866>. A second course was held in October 2019. Then the Covid virus stepped in, and lockdowns became common around the world. Lockdowns in prison meant keeping visitors out. For a few years, no meditation courses took place in prison in Brazil. But then...

July 2023: Pernambuco

The first contact between Vipassana meditators and prison officials was made at Igarassu Penitentiary, in the state of Pernambuco, five years before, in 2018, when parts of the film "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" were shown to both administrators and prisoners. On a second visit, presentations were made to a full room of prisoners, and weekly visits with mini-Anapana sessions were organized. A local server conducted these sessions for a year.

Five years later, Vipassana was invited to return to weekly activities at Igarassu Penitentiary. The prison director, Mr. Charles, said that he could see significant improvements in the behaviour of inmates who attended the regular mini-Anapana

sessions. After some meetings, the penitentiary management announced that the first 10-day course would take place from June 20-July 1, 2023.

One newly built area was perfect to accommodate 14 students. The space chosen for the meditation hall was the same as where the mini-Anapana meetings had been held weekly. The computer room was made into a cafeteria (it was only necessary to remove the computers). Individual separations for each student were created in a gym. A separate servers' dormitory was at the back of the gym, with a door separating the gym and the servers' dorm.

The course started on 20 June with 11 students, one teacher, four internal servers, and one server for external support. For food preparation, one cook and one kitchen assistant were provided by the penitentiary. Administrative and security staff were also assigned by the penitentiary. The course was completed, with smiles on all sides. Vipassana was back!



LAZINESS AND BOREDOM – DON'T LET THEM OVERWHELM YOU

Vipassana teachers around the world answer students' questions every day. Here are a couple of examples, which appeared in the September and December 2023 Massachusetts Vipassana newsletter.

STUDENT: I've been struggling with what I'm interpreting as laziness in my practice. My mind moves very slowly, and I'm having trouble moving quickly, even when I try to. What ends up happening is that the hour passes before I know it – and I get up feeling somewhat apathetic and dull. I've been less happy and balanced in my daily life recently, and I'm concerned it's because I'm not practicing properly. Any guidance? I was thinking maybe I should start placing more emphasis on following the breath for a while until my mind sharpens a bit.

TEACHER: Many students go through periods where their minds are dull and bored. This is one of the "hindrances" or enemies of meditation. S.N. Goenka encourages us to not give in to this enemy but fight against it. You can do this by standing up for a moment, going for a short walk, washing your face and, certainly, going back to the breath to try and pull your mind together. Most importantly, try not to get discouraged. Realize that you have confronted this enemy all your life and NOW, at this moment, you are training your mind to remain alert and not react with negativity.

STUDENT: The Vipassana teachings all tell us that everything we experience while in meditation, and outside of meditation, and pretty much everything we experience in life, is impermanent. But in the end, the teachings tell us there is something else to experience on the other side of impermanence (anicca). My intuition in these moments tells me that it is my eternal soul. My perception of this ineffable Self is that it is eternal. However, the idea of "eternal/constant" is in conflict with the teachings on impermanence. My question is: How to reconcile this conflict?

TEACHER: The Buddha taught that there are three characteristics of existence: anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering or dissatisfaction) and anatta (no-soul, no abiding self-nature). S.N. Goenka explains anatta using the analogy of a car: if you take apart the hundreds or thousands of parts in a modern car, there is no "car," just a collection of parts. But when you assemble them, there's a "car." We can easily see that "car" doesn't really exist – it's just a name given to this collection of parts, which when assembled operate in a certain way.

Likewise, labels such as "me" and "self" and "soul" are names given to the collection of elements that make up a human being: the body, and the four main parts of the mind: vinnana (consciousness), sanna (perception), vedana (sensation, experience), and sankhara (action/reaction). That's it. No "car." However, don't accept anything blindly or because someone says so or a scripture says so. By your own practice, using the tools of Vipassana meditation, discover the truth yourself. Keep on observing sensations and their changing nature. This is tangible and more easily experienced. With the continued understanding of anicca, it will lead to a tangible understanding of dukkha and anatta. Let it happen naturally and by your own experience.

