



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME L • SUMMER 2024

WISE WORDS

Train yourself in doing good that lasts and brings happiness.

Cultivate generosity, the life of peace, and a mind of boundless love.

Itivuttaka 1.22

HOW TO STOP WAR? HAVE MORE PEACEFUL PEOPLE

Vipassana teachers around the world answer students' questions every day. Teacher S.N. Goenka (1924-2013), in more than 40 years of teaching Vipassana meditation answered thousands of questions. Here are a few, which appeared in the Northwest Vipassana newsletter in October 2023.

STUDENT: I am always aware of the subtle sensations on the body, with the understanding of impermanence and anatta (no self). However, I have not yet reached the desired goal. I feel that I am lacking in something. What else should I be doing?

TEACHER: If you keep looking for the goal, you won't practice properly. Your job is to keep on practicing. The goal will come automatically. Don't crave for the goal.

STUDENT: How would you like your students to carry on your legacy after you? What is your unfinished business that you wish to accomplish? Is there anything that we can do for you?

TEACHER: Dhamma will take care. I need not worry about that. I keep on teaching Dhamma, and those who are developing on the path will carry on. Even now, many of them have started carrying on and helping me. Perhaps in my absence also, the same thing will continue.

STUDENT: Now there are many different Vipassana centers around the world but misery, struggles, wars, etc. are increasing. Is there something wrong in Vipassana? Can't Vipassana make the world peaceful? If we cannot stop wars, the future surely will be in ruins. What more can we do for the sake of world peace?

TEACHER: If there is peace within each person, there is bound to be peace in the world. Unless there is peace within, you can't expect peace in the world. Carry on meditating and see that you benefit yourself. If you get benefit, others will also benefit. And this is how there will be peace.

There can't be world peace unless there is peace within individual human beings. If more and more people practice Vipassana, if more and more individuals live a peaceful life, we are closer to world peace. The best thing is that those who have taken courses should continue to progress on the path. The result is always obvious. The result is always good. Keep on practicing yourself, and keep on helping others to develop on the path. Instead of involving yourself in all kinds of questions, practice. Practice for your good. Practice for the good of others. Practice for the good of the whole country. Practice for the good of the whole world. Practice, practice, practice!



IS MEDITATION SOMETHING YOU DO – OR SOMETHING THAT GUIDES YOU?

While meditating is most important, it can also help to hear long-time meditators offer insights. Here is an excerpt of a talk by Vipassana meditation teacher Paul Fleischman at Fordham University in New York on Feb. 26, 2020.

I want to start with an image. Just think of a life in which a person gets up every morning, meditates, seeking a bit of calm and peace, then lives their day. It's just an average day like everyone has, but this person is living with some inner guidance. They know how, to some degree, to contact peace inside themselves. They're not perfect, but they have become very experienced in feeling good. They have certain principles that guide them during the day, basic common sense principles.

After supper, they meditate again, re-contacting that peace they had in the morning; re-contacting the sense of peace they may have lost during the day. Then they live the next day that way, and the next day that way. Then they live a year that way, 20 years that way, 30 years that way. When they wake in the morning, they meditate. Then in the evening, they meditate again. And they live according to certain principles.

That's the kind of life that changes your concept of meditation. Live like that, and instead of thinking of meditation as something you do, your attitude changes. Meditation becomes something you live by, something that guides you.

When you start to meditate, the single most dramatic thing you may experience is a feeling of, "I can't do this! What's wrong with me?" This happened to me, too. As soon as I started to try to meditate, I couldn't concentrate on meditating. So the question is, why is it so difficult to concentrate when you meditate?

When we concentrate, we're taught to focus on intense stimuli like, "Read this book. There's going to be a test on it tomorrow. You'd better concentrate." And the book has got lot of ideas and words that keep you awake. Or concentrate on watching Seinfeld this evening. It's going to make you laugh. It's got ridiculous characters in it, it changes scenes every tenth of a second, somebody is waving their hands or making a body gesture. You can't not concentrate.



But meditation happens without any intense stimuli. You're simply observing something that's very subtle, something that generally we give very low importance to: just ourselves and our own bodies. Usually, we're trying to not pay attention to our bodies. We're trying to pay attention to a book, a movie, a friend, a conversation. When we meditate we're reversing attention away from that, and back to yourself, to self-awareness.

When you sit down to meditate and can't concentrate, it's because the stimuli is too subtle. So the next that happens is you start planning and scheming and thinking. That's what we do. And the trouble with our lives is that we can't stop doing that. We've got this great tool – our brain – but we don't know how to turn it off. And this is a problem, because we have a capacity for something else.

What is that something else? We can loosely call it “wisdom.” The ability to reflect upon yourself, to know what you think and feel in areas other than thinking and planning, to know what your physical body is telling you is good for it, to know what you feel in deep emotional ways that take more time. Our feelings are connected to thoughts, but our feelings are also physical, psychological and emotional information. They tell us how we feel about the people around us, how we want to live, what's important to us.

So meditation is a way of opening up to information that you probably have already. Have, but in our intense, modern culture we have learned to turn away from. Meditation is an experience in learning to again pay attention to other areas of life that are important. Some of these areas are self-knowledge about your body, self-knowledge about thoughts, and insight into your emotions.

When we do Vipassana, we focus on body sensations. You're focusing on your body, but you're learning about your mind. That's because the body and the mind are an integrated entity. When doing Vipassana meditation you focus on observing the sensations of your body – with no judging, no reaction, no evaluation. Just observation. You're merely observing the body sensations within that point in time. Meditation is non-judgmental awareness of the sensations of your body.

Another feature of body sensations is critically important. That is that they're extremely temporary – and changing. Every second you feel something different than you felt a second before. You were hot, and you're getting cold. You were cold, and you're getting hot. You are hungry, you are not hungry. You're itching, you are not itching. Constant, incessant change in body sensations. Your body is constantly changing.

Why is that so important? When the Buddha did Vipassana meditation, he defined it as observing the constant change of sensations of your body – without judging, editing, or controlling them. Notice that constant change is part of the definition. When you're observing, you will observe constant change.

When we meditate on the sensations of our body, the reason we're filled with so many different kinds of sensations is the constant changing in the biochemistry of every cell in our body, and all the cells that are organized into tissues and functions, even arms and legs and heart. The process of constant change is the fundamental basic reality of our life.

Vipassana is practical in the sense that it helps you integrate your mind, body and emotions. It helps you be more aware of your feelings about yourself, about other people, and about your thoughts. It has this really pragmatic, utilitarian, mind enhancing, awareness enhancing quality.

And it also has a deep spiritual quality. It puts you in touch with the fundamental reality of what the world is about. The world is a system of matter and energy, constantly swirling. We're born into it out of those universal laws, and we pass away back into it according to universal laws.

Vipassana is profoundly realistic. Meditate regularly, with attention, and as you experience the constant change within your body, something shifts inside of you. Your sense of the purpose of your life shifts.

DEDICATION, SMALL STEPS HELP GREAT PROJECT GROW

Today a huge Vipassana meditation center exists in Igatpuri, India. People from around the world go there to meditate to learn about themselves. Here is a story published 50 years ago, in 1974, in the Vipassana International Newsletter. that tells of the center's early days.

Igatpuri is a railway town of 18,000 people right on the edge of a 2,000 foot plateau, 85 miles due east of Bombay. It has very pleasant weather compared to Bombay, with only two months of heat and four months of heavy rains, from June to the end of September. It is a rice growing area and surprisingly enough is predominantly Buddhist.

The decision to establish the center at Igatpuri, after years of combing Bombay and surrounding areas, was made in remarkably short time in December 1973. "It wasn't like we chose the land – it seemed more like the land chose us," said teacher S.N. Goenka. He no sooner set foot on the 20 acre plateau with its gentle slopes, three small hills and mango trees than he said, "Yes, this is the place."

The agreement to purchase was quickly made, but red tape, surveys and permission to change the zoning from an industrial area dragged on for eight months. But government permission to purchase has now been obtained, and as soon as surveys are completed preliminary building can get under way. It is hoped to have the first course in March 1975, partly in buildings, partly in tents, but much work will have to be done.

The center is 10 minutes from town, the Plateau of Peace standing about 100 feet above the town level. Behind it stands a massive mountain which is covered with a carpet of greenery and waterfalls during the monsoons. It is surrounded by the Hindu cremation shed, the Muslim Cemetery, the Parsee Tower of Silence for the Dead, the goat slaughterhouse, the autopsy building, the garbage dump and the target practice area. Goenka said, "Students will have to pass through all these difficulties to reach the Plateau of Peace." As it happened, a body was burning at the time. He added, "(Students) will be aware that finally this is the end for everybody."

June 5 saw a most moving and historic scene. Goenka came with the architect and discussed plans for the 500-cell (double decker) "Zone of Silence," ie. the meditation hall leading off it and the teachers' rooms behind – all in a straight line as in Sayaji U Ba Kihn's center in Rangoon, Burma.

Goenka selected the site for the shrine room which will be the heart of the meditation center, and for half an hour there sat in the open with three North American meditators. As the historic sitting came to an end, Goenka smiled broadly and said softly, "Nice, Nice."

It may be only a coincidence, but since that day the cat and dog who were already on the property have become good friends instead of deadly enemies, and the cat will not chase rats even if they walk in front of him. Also "by coincidence," the four thieves who had been regularly raiding the buildings, even stealing the tiles off the roof, were arrested one hour after Goenka arrived in town. The local people pointed them out to the police, as they felt it was unfair to disturb those only interested in peace... Much metta (loving kindness) went in the direction of the police cells.

Already group sittings have started. Three 10-day self-courses have been held and one 24-day self-course also. Goenka's instructions to the meditators was "Meditate! Meditate! Meditate! to clean yourselves and the surroundings."

As Goenka said, "I am sure that the Dhamma enthusiasm of the students around the world will enable the center to come up quickly."

