



Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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Words of Dhamma

*Utthānavato satīmato sucikammaṣṣa nisammakārino,
saññatassa dhammajīvino, appamattassa yasobhivaddhati.*

*Ever grows the glory of one
who is energetic, mindful and pure in conduct,
discerning and self-controlled, righteous and heedful.*

Dhammapada 2.24

FORTY YEARS OF A NEW LIFE

By S.N. Goenka (Vipassana Research Institute, 2014)

Vipassana meditation comes to us through a lineage of teachers who have handed it down through generations from teacher to student. Goenkaji's teacher was Sayagi U Ba Khin. In addition to being a Vipassana teacher, he was also a top official in the Burmese government, heading several agencies. Goenkaji, throughout his life, expressed gratitude to Sayagi U Ba Khin for introducing him to a teaching that transformed his life from one of misery to one of happiness, peace and service to others. We bookend this issue of the newsletter with articles that highlight some of the lessons Goenkaji learned from his teacher.

Besides my daily practice of meditation, I visited my revered Sayagi at his center in Yangon every Sunday morning at 7:00 for group meditation and I continued to go deeper in Vipassana *panna* (experiential wisdom) by taking at least one ten-day course a year. At times I also undertook longer, more intensive retreats. Gradually, I came to realize the true purpose for human existence. The reality of the senses at the mental and physical levels, their universal characteristics of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (egolessness), became increasingly clear experientially. I could see the truth as obviously as a piece of fruit held in my hand.

Deep gratitude flows toward the unbroken tradition of teacher-student, diligently maintained in India and thereafter in Myanmar, which preserved the basic tenets of this knowledge in total purity. Gratitude flows toward my Dhamma father, Sayagi, who taught me Vipassana with such compassion, and firmly established me in the theoretical and practical aspects of pure Dhamma. When I survey the last forty years of my new life on the path of Vipassana, my heart brims with deep satisfaction and joy. In the worldly sphere, during these forty years, there have been so many ascents and descents, so many springs and autumns, so many turns of the tide. But the daily practice of Vipassana never failed to help me to develop equanimity in all situations.

My life is fulfilled. From the abundant compassion of my respected Teacher, I have received incomparable sustenance, and I continue to receive it in such abundance. The rejuvenating medicine of Dhamma gives me confidence to move firmly on. It continues to benefit me so much and uplifts so many others also. Pondering this, a spark of gratitude toward my respected Teacher rekindles in my heart. The river of Dhamma that started flowing 25 centuries ago through the efforts of the supremely compassionate Buddha – may it spring forth once again ... May it liberate all those who are enchained, who are tired and thirsty, who are in pain and sorrow. May it benefit all, may it uplift all – this wish of goodwill flows from my heart.

Having experienced and appreciated the Buddha's teaching deep like the ocean, broad like the vast earth and high like the Himalayas, I feel very comfortable in accepting, practicing and passing it on in its pristine purity.

Dhamma is *paripunna* – it is complete, there is nothing to add. And it is *parisuddha* – so pure, that there is nothing to be removed.

POSITIVE RESULTS HELP INMATES IN ISRAEL

The following is from a letter sent by two Vipassana meditators in Israel.

Dear friends,

The latest Vipassana prison course in Israel ended with 16 participating inmates. It was the fourth Vipassana course in Hermon Prison, in the north of the country. The prison holds about 500 inmates who are considered good candidates for rehabilitation. It is a medium security prison; some of those serving time there have committed violent crimes.

The first Vipassana course was held in Hermon in December 2006, followed closely by a second one in April 2007. Participants successfully completed those courses, but unfortunately changing personnel and logistics put the program on hold. About a year ago, however, renewed interest in the rehabilitation potential of Vipassana in prison brought about another two courses—one in June 2017, and this most recent one.

Attending the graduation on Metta Day brought back memories of attending graduations at the North Rehabilitation Facility in Seattle. Twenty Vipassana courses were (separately) offered to men and women there between 1997 and 2002. Those were the first courses in a U.S. corrections facility.

Metta Day gives inmate students an opportunity to share their experience of Vipassana with fellow inmates and with prison officials, some of whom are their counselors or security officers. We were amazed here in Israel how many times the inmate students ended their sharing with an enthusiastic call for fellow inmates to take a course.

Overall we were inspired and filled with sympathetic joy at the enthusiasm and seriousness with which the Vipassana program is taken. The warden showed willingness to do everything possible to meet the needs of the organizers and servers. In a short meeting after the course, it was clear that she has fully embraced the program, and intends for it to continue.

An old student has been coming to the prison to lead group sittings between courses. And prison officials have committed to doing everything they can to make sure that inmate old students have the opportunity to continue to meditate. They even talked about the possibility of holding one-day courses.

While the date for the next course is not yet set, it is clear that a regular Vipassana program in Hermon Prison is a real possibility and could serve many inmates in the future. May this and other Vipassana prison programs around the world continue to bear fruit and change lives.

*Abundant metta,
Two friends in Israel*



REMEMBERING "DHAMMA BROTHERS" FILMMAKER JENNY PHILLIPS

Jenny Phillips, who created *The Dhamma Brothers*, a 2008 film about a Vipassana program inside William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility in Alabama, died on July 9. She drowned while swimming off the coast of Massachusetts. Trained as a nurse and psychotherapist, Phillips became a writer and film-maker. The meditation program at Donaldson began after she contacted the Vipassana Meditation Center in Massachusetts and said that she knew of a group of men in an Alabama prison who were interested in meditation.

Phillips first visited Donaldson in 1999, and returned many times. As well as the film she published a book, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*. Of the inmate students she said, “What they told me was often surprising and remarkable, and listening to their stories changed the course of my life in ways that I could not have anticipated.”

Jenny Phillips was 76.

VIPASSANA MEDITATION: THE ULTIMATE MARSHMALLOW TEST?

An excerpt from public talks given in 2015 by a Vipassana teacher who is also a psychiatrist.

Recently, the New York Times has given significant attention to the so-called “marshmallow test,” promoted by psychologists at Stanford University. The test claims to show the importance of a child’s ability to delay gratification – the child who can forgo eating one marshmallow immediately in order to obtain two marshmallows later, is a child who will go on to have long-term success in school and life. Although such tests have been criticized for their possible bias, it is nevertheless true that for most of us, most of the time, the “marshmallow test” measures an important capacity of our executive functioning, which regulates impulsivity. The test taps into our ability to watch and wait, and to act only when we can optimize rewards. We can say that Vipassana is the ultimate Stanford marshmallow test for adults.

Instead of trying to control what happens, the Vipassana practitioner learns to regulate his own response, to adapt and vary effort, paying attention to the moods and mental activities that involuntarily arise to the surface of the meditating mind. The practitioner’s effort always remains “observing with non-reaction.” The meditator positions himself like an eagle flying over the land, or like an observational satellite orbiting planet Earth.

Although the student is attempting to sit still peacefully, in fact a flood of mental states and contents wells up, and he learns to respond with the intention to reestablish acceptance, calm and equanimity, through observation without reaction. A meditation course often feels as much “stormy” as “peaceful.” The student becomes a ship’s captain, who attempts to stay on course through both calm and turbulent waters.

There is irony in this: The meditator’s intention is to observe body sensations, but the reality of meditation occurs at the interconnection of mind and body. By observing the body, the other side of the coin is also revealed. By observing sensations, unintentionally, mental life is lit up into awareness. The mind creates our “feelings” from the signals relayed from the body, so that sensations are one of the keys to our emotional life. In meditation, we learn to guide our mind back to mere bodily observation, and emotions are embedded in this activity.

So meditation is a re-learning, a de-conditioning of all those mental states that interfere with calm self-acceptance. Reactive mental states certainly arise, but they are experienced and allowed to pass away.

This is a brief insight into some aspects of the practice, but a student on a Vipassana course can expect much more careful, step-by-step instructions with graduated exercises, starting with simple meditation based on the sensations of breathing, and building up to observation of sensations in the whole body. A 10-day Vipassana course is immersive, deep, multi-faceted; a genuine journey through the winds, eddies, and islands of oneself, unbroken by contact with mundane preoccupations, worries, and escapes. The practice is based upon dedicated time and attention.



Question: Why do you call this teaching an "art of living"? And how can meditation be used as a tool for creating a better society?

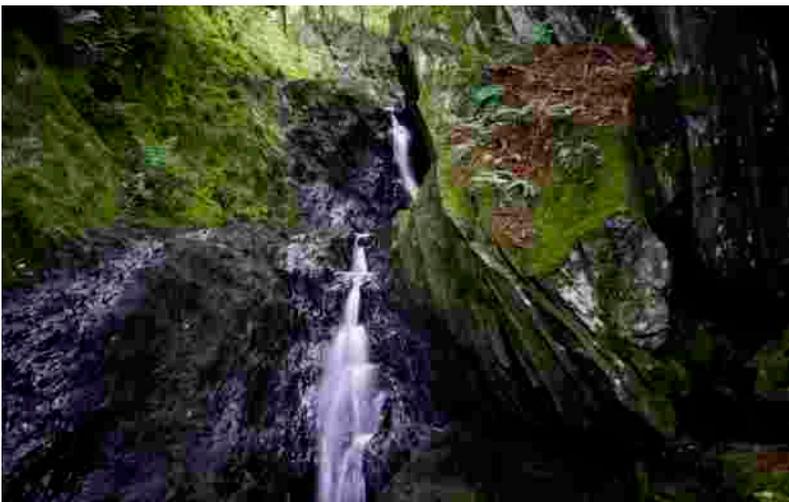
S.N. Goenka: The entire teaching of Buddha is an art of living. If one lives the life of *sila*, of morality, this itself is an art of living. But living an ethical life while having many negative reactions in the mind also makes one unhappy. So, controlling the mind (practicing *samadhi*) and purifying the mind (practicing *pañña*) along with *sila*, one lives a very peaceful and harmonious life. When one lives a life of negativity, one remains tense within and gives nothing but tension to others. When one is living a peaceful, harmonious life, one generates peace and harmony for others also. It is for this reason that it's called an art of living, as a way of life, a code of conduct. In my own life before meeting Sayagyi U Ba Khin, I found the tension was so horrible that I remained miserable, and I made others miserable. Coming onto the Path, I found that I was much relieved. I started living a better life, which was more beneficial for the members of my family, for my friends and for society. So if an individual remains full of negativity, society suffers. If an individual changes for the better, it has a good effect on society.

Question: Meditation has always been considered a withdrawal from society. Why did U Ba Khin give so much importance to the social aspect of meditation? In particular, for householders, do you think that our involvement in society, rather than isolation, can truly help the progress of our meditation?

S.N. Goenka: To gain purity of mind and to gain the Dhamma energy, you withdraw from others and take your attention inside. But then that energy has to be used in an extroverted way. It is like someone making a long jump. You have to step back a little, then run and make the jump. In the same way, you withdraw inside yourself, and you get the energy you need, then you make a long jump into society to serve it. These two cannot be separated. Buddha left his householder's life for six years to gain Buddhahood, but once attained, he was involved in society for the next forty-five years, the remainder of his life, day and night. In the same way, anyone who develops in Dhamma does not run away from the responsibilities of society.

Question: How did U Ba Khin use Vipassana meditation to confront corruption?

S.N. Goenka: Sayagyi's colleagues and subordinates who were involved in corrupt practices did so with minds full of greed and craving. When one begins practicing Vipassana meditation, greed begins to diminish. So these people, having begun to meditate, developed the will to refrain from illegally taking other people's money. Teaching this technique of meditation to his colleagues, U Ba Khin went to the root of the problem – craving in the mind. Not everyone was corrupt, but still, many were inefficient. Because their minds were clouded, they were not capable of making decisions rapidly and effectively. With Vipassana, eliminating every kind of impurity, the mind becomes clearer, sharper, able to get to the root of any problem and respond effectively. So in this way their efficiency increased. Vipassana meditation was truly used to eradicate corruption and increase the efficiency of the administration. An important aspect of Sayagyi's personality that supported him in this endeavor was his absolute faithfulness to the truth, unwavering in the face of pressure or temptation of any kind.



COURSES AND GROUP SITTINGS

Donaldson
Course Schedule 2018

October 11 to 22
(10-day Course)

December 5 to 16
(10-day Course)

Donaldson
Weekly Group Sitzings

Monday & Thursday
After Lunch
meet in the
ABE Classroom