



# Vipassana Prison Newsletter

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## WISE WORDS

Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand people in battle,  
yet one indeed is the noblest victor who conquers oneself.

*Dhammapada 10.103*

## WHAT TO DO WHEN THE MIND WANDERS

*All around the world, Vipassana teachers answer students' questions every day. Here is one that was published in the December 2024 newsletter of the Massachusetts Vipassana center.*

**Question:** I did a 10-day meditation course and now am trying to sit two hours a day to maintain my practice. But I am having a very hard time observing sensations because my mind keeps drifting off into thoughts and daydreams. In some sittings, too, I become extremely sleepy. In order to refocus my mind, I make the effort to practice anapana, following the breath, instead. However, the same thing is happening — I lose focus and my mind continually drifts away. I seem to not be able to maintain concentration on the breath for even one minute.



I am not sure what I can do to reset, or even if I should try to change anything. I have to say I started out noticing this issue and was equanimous about it for the first few days, but now find myself starting to become irritated and frustrated. I don't want to sit for an hour twice a day in order to daydream and have random thoughts. I understand this is not permanent; it will undoubtedly change. Is there anything I can do to try to refocus? How can I come to terms with it now, so that I can continue to sit and not feel like I'm wasting time?

**Answer:** Getting overcome by restlessness and fatigue is common. And you already understand that the situation is impermanent – that's a perfect start! Now – what can be done on a practical level? Here are a few things to try:

- Adjusting your posture might help. Sitting more upright (if you're slouching a little) might help you remain more alert. Or change to another posture.
- Adjusting body or room temperature may help you stay awake.
- Change the time of day when you sit.
- Try intentional breathing for a while... and then resume natural breathing.
- When practicing Vipassana – move the attention faster. Take bigger areas, for example the whole face; whole top of the head; entire arm. Try to get through the entire body more quickly, and see if this helps you remain more alert. Once concentration improves, then you can focus on smaller areas. Generally, students have stronger concentration during a course than sitting day-to-day. Day-to-day, not being in silence, interacting with other people – all of these can distract from focusing on meditation. So, just accept the situation and keep practicing!

*This is an excerpt from “Sayagi U Ba Khin Journal,” a book published by the Vipassana Research Institute in 1991. In it, Daniel J. O’Hanlon, an American who was internationally known as a theologian, describes his first time doing Vipassana meditation. O’Hanlon gained valuable insights by meditating, including realizing it is effective at calming the “monkey mind” we all experience – when the mind jumps from this to that to something else, rather than being focused and calm.*

When I was in my early 50s, after well over 30 years as a Jesuit priest, I began to be interested in enriching my prayer and meditation, indeed my whole process of human and spiritual growth, through contact with Asian traditions. Here is a description of what that experience has been like for me...

After I had been in India several months, I did a 10-day Vipassana meditation course with a remarkable man by the name of Goenka, a lay teacher from Burma. About 12 hours a day were devoted to sitting meditation practice, at times gathered together with him in the meditation hall and at times in our own space. I say “our own space,” but the physical accommodations were very primitive. Along with a couple of others I had a few square feet of space on a solid stone floor in a small curtained-off area.

The practice which we worked at hour after hour, day after day, was simply awareness of sensation in our bodies, just attending to the sensations without either clinging to them or pushing them away. That was the basic practice. Although I had never been taught this kind of practice before, I did not feel it to be in any way out of tune with my previous experience of meditation and prayer. Somewhat later – when I read “The Cloud of Unknowing” (a 14th-century book of Christian writing by an anonymous author) for the first time and reread the writings of St. John of the Cross, I found descriptions in a Christian framework of a kind of awareness much like the Vipassana course taught by Goenka. Of course, I had learned along the way many other methods of stilling the “monkey mind” and allowing the awareness of inner reality deeper than words or concepts to come alive.

But I mentioned Goenka explicitly because I think those 10 days were especially powerful. I gained a better sense of what Eastern spirituality is all about from those 10 days of practice than from all the books and lectures I had previously been through. I had begun this sabbatical year with the conviction that direct experience of these traditions was the best way to really get to know them, and these 10 days confirmed that conviction in me.

Let me illustrate one of the ways in which just that one 10-day experience changed me. When the 10 days were over, I got on a crowded third-class train for an overnight journey. As frequently happens on Indian trains, there was no place to sleep but on the floor in one of the crowded compartments, and I was lucky to find even that instead of having to sit or stand. Several young lads saw me there and began to poke fun at me, this older man from the West.

Now one might expect that under the circumstances, trying to sleep on the floor of a moving train after a week and a half of strenuous days sitting in silent meditation, I would find it hard not to answer in kind or at least be pretty annoyed. What actually happened was that I too found the situation amusing, laughed and joked about it with them, and they ended up sharing their food with me. But to come back to the connection between my early patterns of spiritual practice and things I learned from the East: the principle new thing for me was the discovery of very simple and effective ways of stilling the agitation of mind and body in order to allow a deeper, wordless kind of awareness to come alive...

I made two new discoveries through contact with Asian practice. First, I found that one can move toward the goal of prayer, beyond just words and concepts, without necessarily beginning with words and concepts. I discovered that by such simple things as watching my breath, observing sensations in my body, and chanting with no attention paid to analysis of the words, it was possible to move into the later stages of the process Guigo (a 12th-century Christian monk), described as contemplation. My first discovery, then: one does not need to begin with words or ideas.

My second discovery was that it is possible to allow love to simply emerge out of awareness, without making its cultivation the first object of concern. Note what I am saying here: not that love is unimportant, not that its direct cultivation is a poor path to follow, but that there are other ways to go as well. In the East great attention is paid to



awareness, free of clinging to what is there or trying to get rid of it. More attention is given to this simple awareness, this bare immediate attention, than to the direct cultivation or excitation of feelings and desires.

This practice seems to spring out of the conviction that love and compassion are the natural movement of our true self. When the surface mind and disordered desires are still, the true self awakens without need of any further assistance from us. Indeed, our clumsy efforts to poke at it, and deliberately rouse it, often have the same effect as poking at a clam. It simply closes up tight. But give it stillness, leave it undisturbed, and it opens wide like a water lily in full bloom...

As I continued to enrich my life of prayer and meditation with Eastern resources, I found that there were many effective ways of entering into it without beginning with words, and that the direct practice of simple immediate awareness released in me, without further effort, such fruits as compassion, love, patience, and empathy.



## HOW TO INCREASE THE LOVE YOU GET

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*This article is excerpted from the 2019 talk “Who We Are and Why We Are the Way We Are,” by Dr. Paul Fleischman, an American Vipassana teacher who has written many books. In this excerpt he considers metta, the meditation practice of sending loving kindness to others and ourselves.*

Metta is like our dessert. But unfortunately for me there’s a history of diabetes in my family, and I rarely eat dessert. I need a different metaphor. Metta is like a red sun setting in the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the day. Metta is like taking a hike up a mountain and finally getting to the top and there is the view of hills you sweated so hard to get. Metta is like the last words at the end of the Beatles’ Abbey Road album: “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.” The degree of metta that we generate measures the value of our practice and the equanimity we have achieved, restoring us to some degree of peace and loving kindness. This is so whether we are sitting two hours, or one hour, or whether we are sitting with agitation, no agitation, calm, worry, fear. Regardless of what’s happening to you while you meditate, if you’re generating metta afterwards you possess a pinch of purity, even when your own personal hour has felt tumultuous and difficult. Metta is what elevates our purpose in life above self-absorption.

When I was in college, existential philosophy was the rage. Writers like Heidegger and Sartre were very concerned with establishing the independence of their minds from negative forces around them, but their mood seemed to be grim and embattled. In those days, the basis of my critique of them was unclear, but now I can see that, regardless of how accurately a person thinks about life, unless there is an accompanying change in their emotional state, their mental discipline will not produce the ability to do good that Vipassana practice offers. Vipassana does this because it values metta.

The meditation practice of metta is an emanation of a wavelength of emotions. For a moment we can put aside the concern about whether these emotions stimulate effective behavior. We start by feeling metta for real and specific people, such as parents, children, or friends, and then we extend our feelings of loving kindness towards people unknown to us, but for whom we wish the best, such as the victims of war, pandemics, poverty, and other unfair impositions. Then we can send metta without limits, past all the stars that we can see, past this galaxy, past all the galaxies, to the far corners of existence, in every direction, to all beings, everywhere. Metta is like a laser transporting our good wishes across all spaces. As an organized sceptic and a scientist, I can’t be sure that metta actually can be expected to change the world. Metta can only change one thing: the person who’s sending it. Increasingly, we are able to feel metta consistently as our companion on the path.