

A spiritual giant of our time: Satya Narayan Goenka

Satya Narayan Goenka passed away on September 29, 2013, at his home in Mumbai, India. Although less well known than some other figures, he was widely recognized as the foremost teacher of Vipassana meditation in our times.

In the ancient Pali language of India, “Vipassana” means to see things as they really are. Vipassana meditation is a simple, practical and non-sectarian technique of self-observation for self-transformation. Although it comes out of the Buddhist tradition, it requires no adherence to a set of beliefs. It can be practised by anyone seeking to live a healthy, productive life. Vipassana is taught in 10-day residential courses led by a trained guide.

Goenkaji, as he was affectionately known, was born in 1924 in Mandalay, Myanmar, where his grandfather had moved from India in the late 19th century. After completing secondary school, he entered the family business in 1940. He spent the years of the Second World War in India but returned to Myanmar after the Japanese surrender. In the post-war years, he rapidly became a pioneering industrialist, establishing several factories that gave employment to large numbers of people. He soon became a leader in Myanmar’s influential Indian community and headed organisations such as the Burma Marwari Chamber of Commerce and the Rangoon Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

However, prestige and material success came at the price of mental tension that led to debilitating migraine headaches. Doctors prescribed morphine to relieve the excruciating pain, but they could offer no cure. After a trip to consult specialists in several countries, Goenkaji returned to Myanmar with no hope of a way out of his suffering.

It was then that a friend advised him to join a Vipassana course. At first Goenkaji resisted. He had been born into a conservative Hindu family, and had no wish to become involved in a different religion. He changed his mind after meeting Sayagyi U Ba Khin, the resident teacher at the International Meditation Centre in Yangon. A senior public servant as well as a meditation master, U Ba Khin succeeded in allaying Goenkaji’s concerns and reassuring him that Vipassana was a universal, practical technique of benefit to people living an ordinary life in the world.

In 1956, Goenkaji took his first Vipassana course under the guidance of U Ba Khin. The 10 days of meditation cured his migraine, but that was only a side-effect. More important, through Vipassana he found the mental peace that he had always sought. He also gained renewed insight into the Indian spiritual tradition in which he had immersed himself.

In the following years, Goenkaji brought many family members and friends to courses at the International Meditation Centre. He also continued meditating faithfully and every year he sat another course under the guidance of U Ba Khin. At the same time he carried on with his business career. But instead of seeking only to enrich himself, his aim was to benefit society.

His life changed again in 1962, when the newly installed military government of Myanmar decided to nationalise all industry in the country. At a stroke, Goenkaji lost all the businesses he had established and his family residences. He faced this loss of fortune smilingly. He urged his former employees to continue working hard so that their factories would prosper. For himself, he felt blessed to have the opportunity of spending more time with his teacher, under whose guidance he could progress further in the practice and study of Vipassana.

U Ba Khin relied on Goenkaji to interpret for Hindi-speaking students who came to the International Meditation Centre. But in reality he was preparing Goenkaji for a far more important role. According to a long tradition, Myanmar owed a great debt to India for the invaluable Jewel of Dhamma – that is, the teaching of the Buddha; and now the time was at hand to repay that debt by returning Vipassana – the essence of the teaching – to India. Since U Ba Khin himself could not leave Myanmar, he trained Goenkaji to be his emissary. The opportunity finally came in 1969, when Goenkaji received permission to visit his parents in India. U Ba Khin appointed him a teacher of Vipassana and told him, “You are not going – I am going.” To his student, U Ba Khin gave the task of a lifetime: to reestablish Vipassana in the land of its origin, from which it had disappeared centuries before, and from there to spread the teaching around the world.

Goenkaji conducted his first course in India in July 1969. This soon led to another, and another. In the ensuing years he crisscrossed the country, teaching Vipassana to people of every background. After 10 years of this work, in 1979 Goenkaji travelled abroad to conduct Vipassana courses. He personally taught tens of thousands of people in more than 400 courses held in Asia, North America, Europe and Australia/ New Zealand.

Goenkaji was a prolific writer, and his books, articles and poems on spiritual themes have been translated into many languages. He was also a compelling lecturer, and was invited to speak at very diverse venues including the Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery in Taiwan; the 2000 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; the Millennium World Peace Summit at the United Nations, New York, in 2000; and the Spirit in Business Congress in New York and the Netherlands, 2002.

One important aspect of his work in India was the promotion of interreligious harmony. Thousands of Catholic priests, Buddhist monks, Jain ascetics, Hindu sannyasis and other religious leaders have come to Vipassana courses. The non-sectarian nature of Vipassana enables people to set aside ideological differences and experience the benefits, without fearing conversion.

To meet an ever-growing demand, in 1981 Goenkaji started training assistant teachers who would conduct Vipassana courses on his behalf. To date, he has trained more than 1,300 assistant teachers who have held Vipassana courses in many countries all over the world.

With the help of thousands of volunteers, today these assistants conduct more than 2,500 courses annually in 90 countries, either in one of the many Vipassana centres or a rented sites. Over 120,000 people attend Vipassana retreats every year.

Courses are open to anyone who sincerely wishes to learn the technique and is physically and mentally capable of following a 10-day program. There is no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, community, country, religion, or gender. Courses are offered free of charge for board, lodging, or tuition. The expenses are completely met by voluntary donations from grateful old students. Goenkaji never accepted any financial remuneration, and he always had his own means of support. His assistants similarly receive no material benefit from their service. In this way the teaching remains free of the taint of commercialism.

The meditation centres and courses established under the aegis of Goenkaji all focus on the actual practice of Vipassana. However, to clarify and research the sources of the practice, in 1985 Goenkaji established the Vipassana Research Institute for the purpose of conducting research into the theory and practice of the teaching of the Buddha. The Institute has published the entire Pali Tipitaka and its commentaries, and distributed this vast literature free of charge in book form, on CDs and on the Internet (see www.tipitaka.org).

Goenkaji also inspired construction of the Global Vipassana Pagoda on the outskirts of Mumbai, India (see www.globalpagoda.org). Modelled on the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, it is an expression of gratitude towards Myanmar for preserving Vipassana, the essence of the Buddha's teaching. The Pagoda draws large numbers of Vipassana meditators, pilgrims from traditional Buddhist countries, and visitors from India and beyond who wish to learn about the Buddha and his teachings.

Honours bestowed on S.N. Goenka

From national and state governments:

Government of India:

conferred the Padma Bhushan award in recognition of Goenkaji's social work, 2012

Various state governments of India:

invited Goenkaji as a state guest

Government of Myanmar:

awarded the title of Wunna Kyaw Htin ("One who is of worldwide glowing fame")

invited to Myanmar as a state guest and awarded the title of Maha Saddhamma Joti Dhaja ("Torch-Bearer of Dhamma")

Government of Sri Lanka:

invited as a state guest

awarded the title of Jina Sasana Sobhana Patipatti Dhaja (literally, "Banner of the practice of Dhamma that adorns the teaching of the Buddha")

Honorary degrees

Doctor of Literature from Nava Nalanda Mahavihara Pali Institute, Bihar, India, with the title of Vijja Varidhi. ("Ocean of Knowledge")

Doctor of Literature from Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, India, with the title of Vijja Vagpati ("Foremost in Speaking of Knowledge")

Honours from Buddhist organizations:

From the Mahabodhi Society of India, the title of Vipassanagama Cakkavatti (“King of Kings in Vipassana”)

From the All India Bhikkhu Sangha, the Dharma Murti (Dhamma Mutti) award

From the Pego Mahavihar in Myanmar, the title of Maha Upasaka Vishva Vipasyanacarya (“Great Universal Lay Teacher of Vipassana”)

From the Karen Pariyatti Monastery in Yangon, Myanmar, the title of Adhunika Siri Dhamma Asoka (“Ashoka of this era”)

From the Supreme Council of Kotte Sri Kalyani Samagridharma Maha Sangha Saba, Sri Lanka (the country’s most senior congregation of Buddhist monks), the title of Pariyatti Visarada (“Master of Doctrine”)

In Sri Lanka, the title of Agga Maha Dhamma Pacaraka