

SPREADING BUDDHA'S TEACHING AROUND THE WORLD



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Fear and distress prevail. Although less reported, there are developments bringing peace and happiness to people's lives. One such development is the spread of Gautama the Buddha's ancient teaching of compassion and wisdom around the world today. The Buddha is believed to have lived from about 563 B.C.E. to 483 B.C.E. in India.

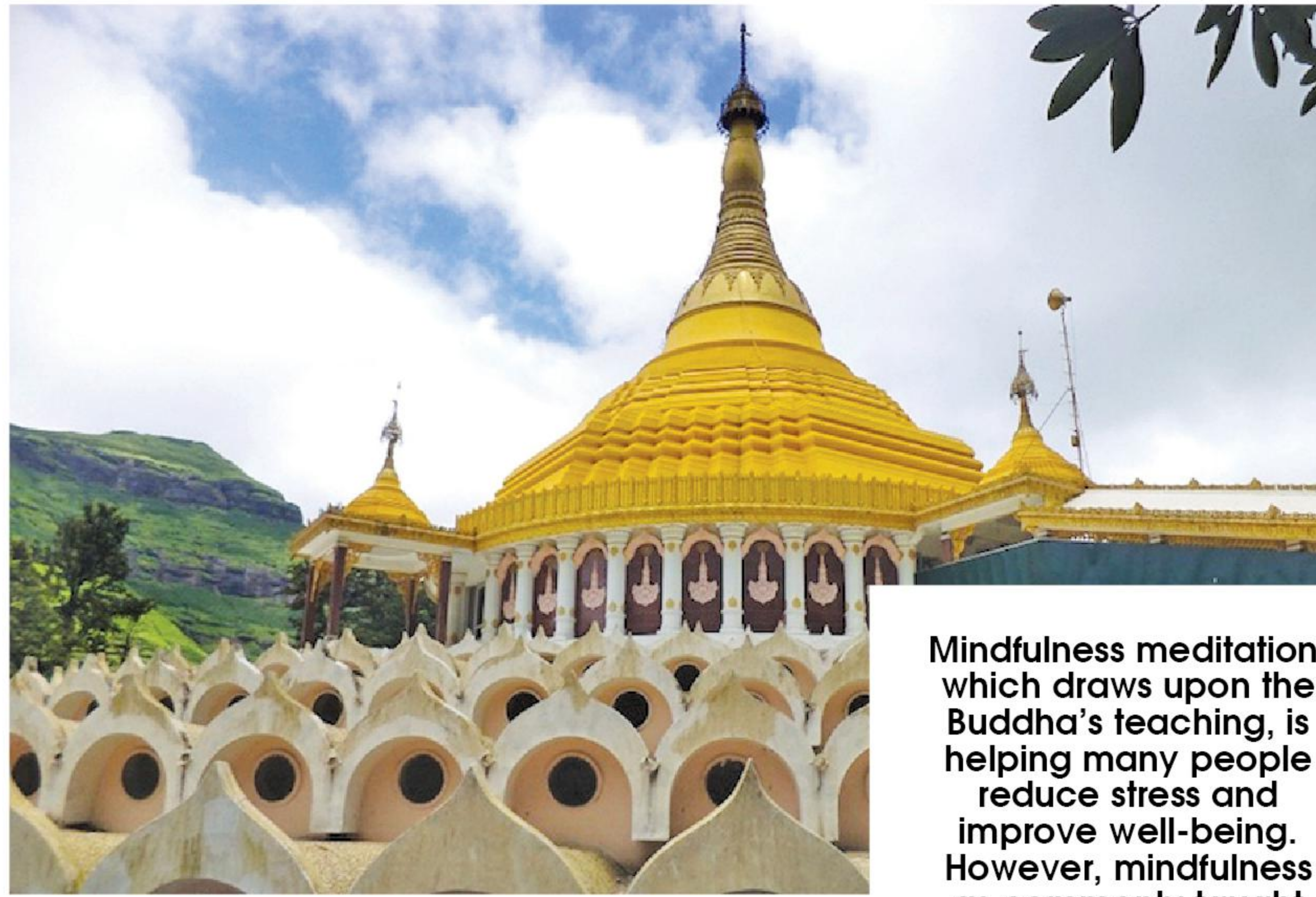
Mindfulness meditation, which draws upon the Buddha's teaching, is helping many people reduce stress and improve well-being. However, mindfulness as commonly taught provides only a limited, technical approach removed from the other integral aspects of the Buddha's teaching, especially ethical conduct and wisdom.

A more comprehensive approach within the Buddha's teaching is *Vipassana* or Insight meditation. It is intimately connected to the Buddha's Four Noble Truths (suffering, the origin of suffering, end of suffering, the path to end suffering)—the Noble Eight-Fold Path. The Path constitutes three aspects Concentration (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration), Ethical Conduct (Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood) and Wisdom (Right Understanding, Right Thought).

The Buddha's teaching and *Vipassana* disappeared from India following his demise in 5 B.C.E. due to internal strife, the resurgence of Hindu Brahmanism and Islamic invasion. Fortunately, the Buddha's teaching was preserved, with difficulty, in the neighbouring countries. The teaching was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka in 1 B.C.E. and in Burma, *Vipassana* was maintained in an unbroken lineage from teacher to student.

Today, many teachers from diverse traditions, mostly monastics, teach *Vipassana* meditation in Asian Buddhist countries as well as in the West. Perhaps most widely followed among them is the lay teacher, S.N. Goenka (respectfully referred to as Goenkaji).

Satya Narayan Goenka was born in Burma (now Myanmar) to a conservative Hindu family of Indian origin. A successful but harried businessman, he became a student of the great Burmese meditation teacher Sayagi U Ba Khin in 1956. Goenka moved to India in 1969, and there he built upon his teacher's work, producing an intensive ten-day course that is now replicated across the world. The *Vipassana* Research Institute that Goenka established in Mumbai, India in 1985 also plays a vital role in exploring the theoretical aspects of the Buddha's teaching in relation to meditation practice.



Pagoda at Dhamma Giri Meditation Centre, Igatpuri, which was founded by Goenka in 1976.



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Currently, *Vipassana* meditation as presented by S.N. Goenka is taught at some 362 locations in 225 permanent centres and 137 non-centres in over 94 countries. There are 166 permanent centres in Asia, 31 in the Americas, 18 in Europe, 9 in Oceania and

one in Africa. Hundreds of assistant teachers, course managers and other staff are engaged in conducting the courses, which are offered on a continuous basis at most permanent centres. Courses for teenagers and children are also available and a few

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highly sought after. Students return again and again and even the more challenging 20, 30, 45-day long courses often have waitlists. Hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life have successfully completed a 10-day course and as the demand increases, more centres are being established. The lack of fulfilment in modern life, the timelessness and universal relevance of the Buddha's teaching and Goenka's unique strengths as a wise, caring teacher and a visionary, skilled organiser are reasons for this phenomenal global expansion of *Vipassana*.

TIMELESS TEACHING

Goenka is emphatic that he is not teaching a sectarian dogma or ideology and that his intention, like the Buddha's, is not the conversion of the world to "Buddhism" but to liberate people from suffering. Goenka's teaching is entirely secular. There are no rites or rituals, only the chanting of Buddha's discourses invoking blessings to all. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to continue supporting their previous spiritual teachers. Goenka also points out that although students are required to put aside other spiritual practices during a course, after completing a course, they are free to practice whatever they wish.

A scholar with in-depth knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures in the original Pali language, as well as a poet, Goenka has distilled the vast teaching of the Buddha and presented it in a lucid, succinct, and engaging way. He has explained the Buddha's teaching as *Dhamma*, the law of nature that is universally applicable to all people regardless of ethnoreligious, socio-economic background or time period. He has presented the *Dhamma* as the law of cause and effect as explained in the Buddha's Four Noble Truth constituting the realities of suffering; impermanence and the arising of suffering; its cessation; and the path to liberation—the Noble Eightfold Path.

Following the Buddha, Goenka has guided students to understand the *Dhamma* not merely at the theoretical level, but as experiential learning acquired through meditation. Students are taught to bring mindfulness to breathing and other sensations in their bodies, not react to changing mind-body phenomena and develop equanimity or balance of mind in the process. Meditation practice is not pre-

sented as an end in itself, but a path to liberation of the mind from its conditioned patterns of craving, aversion and attachment to the self. The insight gained into one's own mind through *Vipassana* practice is expected to help one face the vicissitudes of life with detachment, inner peace and freedom.

ORGANISATIONAL ACUMEN

The success of Goenka's mission to disseminate the Buddha *Dhamma* owes much to his devotion to the Buddha's teaching as well as to his business experience and innovative organisational wisdom.

A unique aspect of Goenka courses is the use of communication technology. While much of modern communication technology is used today to propagate falsehoods and strife, Goenka's example shows that technology can be used positively to disseminate wisdom and harmony instead. Goenka courses are replicated worldwide through reproductions of his original video and audio recordings.

The exact same teaching—meditation instructions and philosophical discourses—is provided in all the centres following the exact same course schedule. The effective use of technology in conjunction with the well-designed course structure has allowed Goenka to be the teacher of all his courses worldwide. The uniformity and authority thus created leaves no room for diverse interpretations by assistant teachers facilitating courses in different locations.

Another unique and exemplary feature of the Goenka approach pertains to finance. All courses are provided without any fees or charges to the students and all the teaching, course management, cooking and other work (with some exceptions) are also performed by volunteers without any payment in return. The considerable amounts of money needed for establishing centres and running courses all come from voluntary donations from students who have completed courses.

The labour needed also come from students who have sat courses and who want to help others also take courses. While this kind of generosity is unheard of in the exploitative market economy, it is a testimony to the success of Goenka's teaching and the practical application of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha *Dhamma* as imparted by Goenka touches students at a deep level, generating compassion, generosity and selflessness. It inspires them to donate money and services so that the *Dhamma* continues to spread, benefitting more and more people.

Satya Narayan Goenka passed away on September 29, 2013. Elaichi Devi Goenka (*Mataji*), his wife and partner in the *Dhamma* mission, also passed away, on January 5, 2016. Yet, through his recordings, Goenkaji continues to teach at hundreds of worldwide locations every day. As he repeatedly chants the Buddha's blessing *Bhavatu Sabba Mangalam* (May All Beings Be Happy), the darkness of ignorance, greed and hatred diminishes, spreading the light of compassion, generosity and wisdom around the world.

(The writer, a scholar and practitioner, has taught at Yale, Brandeis, Mount Holyoke (where she received tenure), Georgetown, American and other universities, and colleges in the U.S. and abroad)