



50  
**Rajasthanis**  
Faces of the Community

by Swasti Mittal-Chaudhary





# S. N. Goenka

Spiritual Guru, Vipassana Meditation

*A successful businessman with acquaintances in all the right places, S. N. Goenka was leading a life that could make many envious. But, his life soon became unsettled with the growing pressures of business and other work commitments. Grappling with those pressures became tough, until he was enlightened with the serenity of Buddhism and one of its many virtues, Vipassana. After that there was no looking back for this industrious man.*

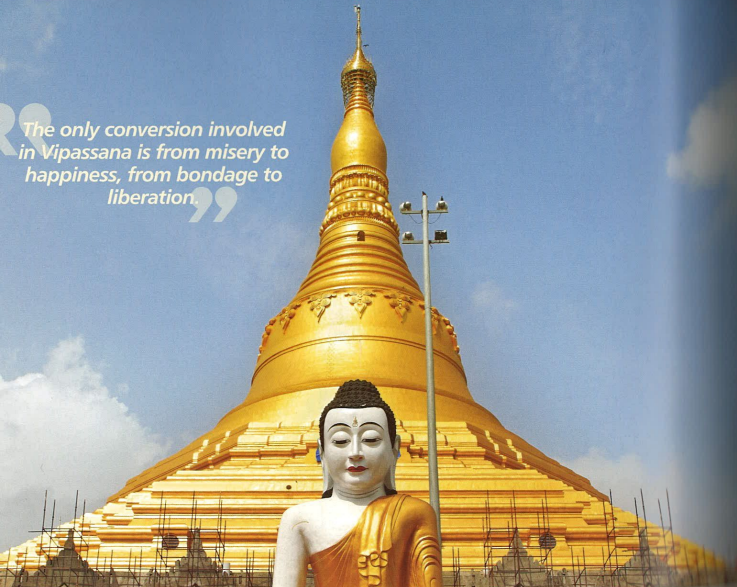
**I**t all started with headaches; they were migraines that would numb me for just a few seconds at first and then they slowly grew in intensity and frequency. It was getting intolerable. And then, I was introduced to U Ba Khin in Burma. He showed me a path that helped me attain a new level of realisation. I wouldn't say that I felt liberated. But, I definitely felt lighter. It was all because of Vipassana—an experiential scientific meditation practice that helps you achieve a profound understanding of the mind and the body, which in turn helps you lead a peaceful life.

I was born in Mandalay, Myanmar. My family was a prominent business family. I grew up practising traditional Hindu customs and learning Indian values. Soon after graduation, I joined the family business (this was in the '40s). I was doing well. Life was settled. There were a lot of responsibilities beyond my duties to the family business. I was an active member of the Burma Marwari Chamber of Commerce and the Rangoon Chamber of Commerce & Industry. I even travelled with Union of Burma trade delegations around the world as their advisor.

With too much responsibility, frustrations started to grow. I started getting irritated easily. I would be angry all the time. There was so much rage building up within me. I would snap at people for trivial reasons. Soon, migraines started bothering me. At first, they lasted only a few seconds and were never intense. But, slowly they grew into minutes-long migraines that would almost paralyse me for as long as they occurred. They were painful beyond imagination. I started taking medicines and tried various paths of treatment to get rid of those awful headaches. Nothing helped. I was prescribed morphine to ease the pain. It helped to an extent. It used to dull my senses and helped me



The only conversion involved in Vipassana is from misery to happiness, from bondage to liberation.”



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महामानव बुद्ध  
बुद्ध : अध्यात्म क्षेत्र के सर्वोत्तम वैज्ञानिक  
Buddha : Super Scientist of Spirituality

महामानव बुद्ध की महान विद्या विपश्यना : उद्गम और विकास।  
महामानव बुद्धाची महान विद्या विपश्यना : उद्गम आणि विकास।

Origin and Spread of Vipassana : The Great Buddha's Supreme Teaching.

မူလမြစ်ကမ်းခြေမှ စတင်ခဲ့သော ဗုဒ္ဓဝိညာဉ်ထူး ဝိပဿနာတို့၏ ဖြန့်ချိရေး

deal with the morbid pain. I liked the dullness and the state of no-feeling. I started taking morphine regularly, and before I could understand the situation, I was addicted. I couldn't live without regular doses. I was spiralling downwards. I needed help. And then, an opportunity knocked.

In 1955, I met U Ba Khin. He was one of the foremost teachers of the Buddhist form of meditation—Vipassana. As I started practising under him, the intensity and frequency of my migraines started decreasing. My irritations and frustrations started receding. I started feeling unburdened. For the first time in many years, my shoulders felt light and weightless. It was a peaceful feeling. My existence had reached an eerie calm after years of noise and chaos. I chose not to let go of this feeling. I continued to learn under the able guidance of U Ba Khin for 14 more years. By 1962, I had retired from my business responsibilities with the nationalisation of all industries in Myanmar. And then in 1969, I was appointed a teacher of Vipassana. After a few years of teaching at U Ba Khin's school, I decided to spread the scope of Vipassana beyond the borders of Myanmar. It was important for everyone in the world to know of this practice so that it could benefit their lives.

Buddhism is not a sectarian religion. It is *dhamma*—the path to liberation from the continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth. It was for all and sundry. Your religion, caste or class, is not important. What matters is your will to take up the challenge, to keep yourself disconnected from the world for a few days

and attain a peace that you may have never experienced. It was an indecipherable passion for Vipassana that drove me to create awareness about its existence. Reaching out to people around the world with a mission to make their lives better, added to the calm and peace that I was already feeling. The happiness of having reached a peaceful state in life shows clearly on people I teach Vipassana to. That expression on their face is all that I want. The fact that I can help people attain true happiness is enough for me.

In 1974, we established the Vipassana International Academy at Dhamma Giri, Igatpuri. Over the years, the academy has reached never heights. With the spread of knowledge about Vipassana, I had to train new teachers. We started setting up new centres. I started travelling across seas, and taught a few courses at every new centre. Besides India, we now have centres in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Japan, U.S.A., Canada, UK, France, Switzerland, Myanmar, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. Ten-day programmes are held continuously at all these centres. We have volunteers who work as teaching assistants from the People's Republic of China, Iran, Muscat, the U.A.E., South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mongolia, Russia, Serbia, Taiwan, Cambodia, Mexico, and all the countries of South America. With 70 centres across 21 countries, it is very important for us to train more and more volunteers to help us in conducting the courses.

When I look back to who I was when I was actively involved in business, compared to today, when I am actively involved in spreading the word about Vipassana, I feel the stark difference. The time when I used to get easily frustrated, angry and grappling with morphine addiction was a dark and scary phase. But today, it is very peaceful, calm and happy. I like it. I love it.



Left: S. N. Goenka with his wife, Ilachidevi, inside the Global Vipassana Pagoda  
Facing Page: The Global Vipassana Pagoda at Gorai, Mumbai

## S. N. Goenka...

- was born on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1924, in Mandalay, Myanmar, and is affectionately called Goenkaji.
- has given lectures in diverse forums such as the United Nations General Assembly, Harvard Business Club, Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery (of Ven. Sheng Yen) in Taiwan, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the Smithsonian Institute, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Silicon Valley Indian Professionals Association, and to members of the Indian Parliament.
- has always been a tireless worker. At the age of 78, accompanied by his wife and a delegation comprising his students and other teachers of the centre, he travelled for 128 days across Europe and the West to spread awareness about Vipassana.
- commissioned the construction of the Global Vipassana Pagoda. It is situated in the northern suburbs of Mumbai on a peninsula between Gorai creek and the Arabian Sea.
- has taught the art of Vipassana to a number of religious leaders.