

Vipassana

Buddhism is an interesting religion. It has no god. Its goal is egolessness, impermanence, and suffering. Its core is humility. Its tool is meditation.

The word 'buddha' means 'awakened one' in Pali (a Middle Indo-Aryan language). A buddha is a person who has woken up and can see things as they really are. The man Siddhartha Gautama, who founded what we today call Buddhism, lived around 2500 years ago. He was born a prince in a clan in Northeastern India. His father was more of an oligarch, sharing power with other oligarchs. The surrounding villages were owned by the oligarchs and the villagers were their serfs.

Siddhartha was raised in privilege, shielded from the hardships of his father's poor subjects. His marriage was arranged, and he and his wife had a son. But Siddhartha was not satisfied with his lot. He felt sorry for the serfs and uncomfortable with his privilege. He often snuck out of his palace to mingle with his subjects, seeing poverty, illness, hardship and death. He met an ascetic who had given up earthly comforts in order to stop his cravings and just exist. He studied with yogis and hermits, attempting to meditate his way to understanding the world. He wandered around as a beggar, wearing rags and begging for food. At one point he was so weakened and emaciated that he accepted milk and rice pudding from a local village girl who thought he was a spirit who could grant her a wish. After he recovered, he sat under a pipal tree, a type of fig tree, forever afterwards known as the Bodhi tree, and meditated. It was here that he had his 'awakening.' Eventually he awakened to what has come to be known as the 'Middle Way,' a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-abuse. This eightfold path, of right insight, understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration, leads to dhamma, or liberation from the impurities of the mind.

Meditation can be learned by anyone. In fact, any time we allow our minds to focus and think we're meditating.

One of many techniques of Buddhist meditation is Vipassana. This is the technique I chose to learn because it can be learned in one ten-day session. It's also free for first time students (although you're allowed to make a donation if you wish).

'Vipassana' means 'seeing things as they really are.' It is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was rediscovered by Siddhartha Gautama and taught by him as a universal remedy for universal ills. Today it is taught in hundreds of locations worldwide. I went to the one close to my home, in the town of Twenty-Nine Palms near Palm Springs.

I had made up my mind to do the course many years earlier, because I wanted to 'see things as they really are.' But I was too cowardly to do it by myself. I wanted someone else to share the misery with: 10 hours a day for 10 days of meditation. I invited my sister, and three months before the course began, at 6 am on a specified date, we signed up.

Part of the sign up is a questionnaire where you agree to the code of conduct: you are not allowed to engage in killing (no bug squishing), stealing, sexual activity, speaking falsely, and intoxicants. You agree to do as you are told by the teachers. You agree to observe silence, and not speak to or make eye contact with or otherwise engage with any other meditator during the 10 days. By following the code of conduct you learn to master your own mind, and react autonomously to everything around you.

As the date of the course approached, my sister said she was having trouble finding caretakers for her animals: one dog, two mules and three horses. As the course was over the Thanksgiving vacation, she really did have trouble. Eventually she had to drop the course, and her slot opened up to someone on the wait list.

On the afternoon before the course officially began, a Wednesday, I ride-shared the 3 hour drive with another attendee, who was a massage therapist. She was 74 years old and was the oldest student this session. She had been a free spirit most of her life, practicing legitimate massage therapy (she explained there was the other type which she abhorred, and as a result just eked out a living). She had many friends, loved motorcycles, loved travel, and most of all, loved life and exploration. She, too, had wanted to do Vipassana for many years, and now here she was. We were told to arrive between 3 and 5 pm on the day before the course started and got there at 3.

The center is located in a beautiful desert, just outside Joshua Tree National Monument. We could see the jagged rocky peaks of the park on one side of the property, and the broad basin of the desert town of Twenty-Nine Palms on the other side. The grounds were nicely landscaped with desert plants, lovely rock scapes, and quarter-mile walking paths, one on the men's side and one on the women's side.

We gathered in the dining hall and checked in. We were not allowed to bring in any reading material, no cell phones, wallets or purses. We handed over our belongings to the volunteers who put them in the safe for the next 10 days. About one-fourth of the attendees were volunteers, people who had been through the 10 day course already, and now helped out in the kitchen, maintaining the grounds, greeting newcomers, and sounding the gong for 4 am wakeup and before each communal meditation session. Two people were teachers, one for the men's side and one for the women's. All together there were 35 men and 35 women.

The entire grounds were divided in two: one side for men and one side for women. The dining hall was in one building, but one half was for men and one half for women. We got 2 vegetarian meals a day, breakfast and lunch, buffet style, at specific times only, and tea (and milk and fruit for first-timers) for dinner. Buddhism is an aesthetic practice, involving a certain amount of deprivation, so food is a helpful means of self-discipline. That includes not eating animals, but vegetarianism also addresses Buddhism's basic kindness to all creatures.

The meditation hall was one room but split down the middle by a 5 foot wide open aisle (no screen or divider separated the two halves, only our self-discipline kept us from peeking across the aisle), one side for men and one side for women. The two teachers sat in front of their respective sides. Most of our time during the course would be spent in the meditation hall.

Each attendee got their own room to sleep in. They were small and sparse. Each room had a small bed with a thin mattress, a rack to hang clothes on, a night table, a lamp, and a bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower. In the bathroom was a bucket with cleaning supplies. Each attendee was expected to clean their own room and bathroom. You could clean-up throughout the course, and on the last day several hours were set aside to do a grand clean-up.

That evening we had a pretty good vegetarian meal: Mexican, with beans, rice, cheese, salsa, green beans, and a fresh salad bar. A condiment tray included salt, pepper, hot sauces, garam masala, curry, oil, vinegar, and other assorted herbs and spices. Drinks included coffee, milk and nut milks, a large assortment of teas, and water.

After dinner that first day we gathered in the dining hall, and one of the volunteers gave the introduction to the course. He went over all of the information about the next 10 days, the daily schedule, the rules of conduct, and the specifics of the course. He asked who among us were old students, and of these he asked for volunteers, men on one side and women on the other, to do the various tasks needed to run the facility: kitchen, grounds, gong-ringer, and manager. We then were escorted up to the meditation hall, a lovely square building on top of a hill. A volunteer opened a cabinet outside the hall, filled with meditation pillows and props. I took two small props and a flat pillow. Inside the hall we were each shown our assigned space on the floor. Mine was in the back against the wall, right next to the middle aisle across from the men. I came to appreciate this space, as I could lean my back against the wall when I got tired of sitting upright. My 74 year old carpool buddy was also against the wall, a few ladies down. I put down the two props and the flat pillow. This would be my meditation home for the next 10 days. Once we all got situated and sat down on our spaces, our silence officially began.

That evening, we were introduced to Mr. S. N. Goenka on the video monitor. Mr. Goenka passed away of old age in 2013, but his voice and his videos lead the Vipassana meditations worldwide. He would be our guide during meditations throughout the day, and dharma talks ('dharma' means 'cosmic law and order') that took place every evening at 7:00. I came to look forward to his voice and his videos, not just because his was the only voice allowed but also because he was such a kind and good teacher. Basically everything I learned in the course was through the teachings of Mr. Goenka, and I learned a lot.

After this introduction I went to my assigned room, which was a middle room of 4 rooms in a row, between two rooms on one side and one room on the other. I noticed that my carpool buddy was in one of these rooms, at the end. She had a smoker's cough, which announced where she was. We were told that the walls of the rooms were thin, so please respect our neighbors and make as little noise as possible. No slamming drawers or doors, no singing, chanting, or otherwise disturbing the silence. The first night I could hear one of my neighbors noisily hanging up her clothes on the clothes rack. Several times the hangers fell to the ground with a clatter. She also slammed the nightstand drawers shut a few times. Then I heard her trying out the alarm clock, which beeped. I tried my alarm clock as well. I wanted to wake up before the gong. I realized that the walls were indeed thin, so I tip-toed and shut the bathroom door with care. I also tried to shut the toilet seat quietly. We were allowed to take showers only between 4 am and 9 pm when everyone was awake, as long as it wasn't during mandatory meditation periods. Around midnight I awoke to loud snoring. I was grateful I had brought my 32 decibel earplugs. I put them in and slept soundly the rest of the night.

Here is the daily schedule:

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| 4:00 am | Morning wake-up bell |
| 4:30-6:30 am | Meditate in the hall or in your room |
| 6:30-8:00 am | Breakfast break |
| 8:00-9:00 am | Group meditation in the hall |
| 9:00-11:00 am | Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions |
| 11:00-12:00 pm | Lunch break |
| 12:00-1:00 pm | Rest and interviews with the teacher |
| 1:00-2:30 pm | Meditate in the hall or in your room |
| 2:30-3:30 pm | Group meditation in the hall |
| 3:30-5:00 pm | Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions |
| 5:00-6:00 pm | Tea break |
| 6:00-7:00 pm | Group meditation in the hall |
| 7:00-8:15 pm | Teacher's Discourse in the hall |
| 8:15-9:00 pm | Group meditation in the hall |
| 9:00-9:30 pm | Question time in the hall |
| 9:30 pm | Retire to your own room—Lights out |

Day 1

The next morning my alarm beeped just before 4 am, and then a volunteer banged her gong as she went down the rows of rooms. I looked outside my window, which looked out over the town of Twenty-Nine Palms.

It was dark, with a few distant town lights visible. The sky was clear and black, dotted with plenty of stars. I got ready and then went to the meditation hall. By 4:30 the hall was full, and everyone was seated in their assigned spaces. Then the female teacher entered from the front, wearing a lovely white gown, and sat cross-legged on the low podium in front of the women's section. The male teacher, wearing a blue tunic and loose blue pants, entered in a wheelchair on the men's side. He announced the instructions, and ran the tape player and video player. Mr. Goenka's voice guided us through the initial meditation, with a sing-song chant. As you can see in the schedule above, from 4:30 am to 6:30 am you can meditate in the hall or in your room. If you got tired of meditating in the hall you could get up any time and go to your room to meditate. The first day or two everyone came to the meditation hall during each meditation session, I think just to get acclimated with guidance. I was quite comfortable sitting on my legs or cross legged for the first 15 minutes or so, but then my back started to ache. I gratefully sat back against the wall. I was able to notice, because I was in back and could see everyone in front of me, that everyone else sat pretty still, upright, and quiet. At 6:30 we eagerly went to breakfast, which each morning consisted of warm oatmeal, with raisins, nuts, seeds and sugar condiments, stewed prunes, fruit, dry cereals, and yogurt, milk, and the usual assortment of coffee, milks, teas and water. After sitting for two hours I realized I was very hungry. I got something of everything and went back for seconds.

After breakfast I took a brisk walk on the desert pathway. Quite a few other women were walking as well. I had gotten used to being sequestered in my own personal space, so I studiously avoided looking at anything except feet as they walked past me. I did glance at backs occasionally if someone passed me, but otherwise, I saw a nice variety of Nikes, sandals, tennis shoes, Texas and Crocs.

At 8:00 am we reconvened in the meditation hall. This time Mr. Goenka's voice explained that we were now going to start focusing our minds in preparation for the real Vipassana technique. I resolved to be less fidgety. Mr. Goenka instructed us to focus on breathing through our nostrils, a common meditation technique. Because Vipassana is 'self-transformation through self-observation', we were told to keep our eyes closed from now on throughout each meditation, to focus on ourselves. We focused on our nostrils, first the left nostril then the right nostril, noticing the air moving in and out of each one. And behold! Air moved through one nostril for a few minutes, then both nostrils, then through the other nostril for a few minutes. I was taught in medical school that this was the case, with air flowing back and forth between the nostrils to prevent the delicate skin inside the nostrils from drying out, but I had never actually noticed it before. Luckily for me, this was mind-blowing, and I had a great time noticing the switch for the rest of this second meditation.

At 9 am the male teacher asked the new female students to stay in the hall. All the other students could stay in the hall or go to their rooms to continue meditating. The male teacher left in his wheelchair. The female teacher then called up the new female students by their first names, 5 at a time, to sit on the mat in front of her. She made eye contact with each one of us, one at a time, and asked if we understood breathing through our nostrils. As far as I know, each one of us nodded yes. We then went back to our spaces and continued meditating until 11:00 am

At 11:00 am we filed silently into the dining hall for lunch. I got a glass of water. I claimed a spot on the edge of the dining room, at a counter facing a bare wall. As long as I was going to be silent I was also going to be austere. But I loved the food! Today we had the usual salad bar, but also Indian food, with vegetable curry, naan, toasted cauliflower, and coconut cake. I was enjoying myself so far.

From noon to 1 students could meet with the teacher if they needed more instruction or had questions.

From 1 to 2:30 we meditated either in our rooms or in the meditation hall.

From 2:30 to 3:30 we meditated in the hall with Mr. Goenka's guidance. Again he went through the nostril thing. At the end of this session the teacher asked the new male students to remain in the hall, with the rest free to stay or leave. The female teacher got up and left. This time the men met with the male teacher, 5 at a time. I chose to stay in the hall and continue meditating there.

Between 5:00 and 6:00 pm we returned to the dining hall for tea. New students were allowed to have some fruit and put milk in their tea. Old students were only allowed to have tea with lemon. I found out later that this is traditional in Buddhist monasteries, where the devotees are fully trained to consume minimally prior to an early bedtime. This probably has double significance: self-mastery, and better sleep. I found I had none of my usual nighttime heartburn when I stopped eating well before bedtime.

Between 6:00 and 7:00 we returned to the meditation hall, with Mr. Goenka's voice. After about 55 minutes we were allowed to take a brief break, and then return for Mr. Goenka's dharma talk.

I found out quickly how wonderful Mr. Goenka and his talks were. The evening dharma talks were the highlight of each day.

Satya Narayan Goenka was born in Burma (Myanmar) in 1924. His family was wealthy industrialists. His parents were Hindu. Mr. Goenka went into the family business with full force, until, beginning in 1955, he became progressively debilitated with migraine headaches. He relates that he went to doctors around the world to get treatment, but no western treatments, even opioids, were effective. A friend in Burma suggested he try a course in Vipassana. Even though he was Hindu, and Vipassana was Buddhist, he agreed to try it. He said that on the first day, when he was told to sit still, he went back to his little room and began packing his bags to leave. A woman student, who had done the course before, told him that she, too, had difficulty the first few days, but once she put her mind to it she found it transformative. 'Just give it another day' she urged him. He did, and the rest is history. Using his new meditation skills he was able to spend an hour or even a few minutes a day surveying his body with his mind, and objectively overriding and redirecting bad thoughts, bad feelings, and bad behaviors. He was left with a greater understanding of his physical and mental self. The migraines diminished and he was able to return to the family business.

He studied with the Vipassana master for 14 years and then became an instructor in 1969. He eventually left the family business, and then led the growth of Vipassana meditation centers around the world.

Mr. Goenka's dharma talks are spiced with his human experiences. On the first dharma talk, he reassured us that he also had a very hard time, and continued to struggle to sit and meditate. He even admired us for agreeing to stay cooped up for 10 days and do what we were told. But this is because the rewards are great. I agree.

After Mr. Goenka's dharma talks we were allowed to take a brief break. We would then return at 8:15 pm to continue to meditate in the hall.

That evening I returned to my room to find a yellow post-it stuck to my door. I panicked! We were told yesterday during orientation that there would be no communication (except with the teachers inside of the meditation hall), unless the manager got an emergency contact from the family. In the span of a second or two I went over all the possible disasters I could think of. Then I read the note. It was written by someone whose first language was not English. It said, 'I sorry. I not write good English. I have hard time sleep, you make too much noise. Please make no noise. I hear slam and alarm beep. I have very hard night. I sorry. Thank you.' My first thought was 'thank God nothing happened to my family.' My second thought was, 'she has the wrong person, it was my neighbor slamming drawers and dropping hangers.' My third thought was 'what a jerk, such a snowflake.' My thoughts kept multiplying. Since I hadn't made eye contact with anyone after that first orientation, I could not picture my false accuser. Normally I would picture someone I did not like for whatever reason and diminish that person in my mind, and make myself feel better. I got to work mentally: I need paper and pencil to write back to her. But I don't have anything to write on or with, I either left it in the car or gave it up in the safe. So how did

she get paper and pencil? (cheater). I then remembered being told that if we had a problem we could go to the manager. I found out where the manager was and almost knocked on her door. What's the use, I thought, before I knocked. Besides, I did not want to come across as a whiner. I went over what I was going to tell this person if I confronted her. Then I remembered that we weren't allowed to interact with each other. I felt trapped and released at the same time.

I went to the last meditation of the day. I sat down at my space. What a snowflake I am, I admitted, getting so worked up by a note. I admitted to myself I could be quieter. No more alarm. I'd wake up with the gong. I'll wear socks in my room. I won't open drawers after hours (not that I did), and I'll be much more careful with the hangers (I really did not drop any). But it still wasn't me making all that noise.

After the meditation I went back to my room. Before I had opened the door my accuser appeared. She stationed herself just outside my door. I won't describe her physical appearance, but I certainly will describe her emotional appearance. She was hopping mad. She said over and over, I sorry! I sorry! I said, 'It wasn't me, I did not make that noise, it was the room next to me.' I sorry! I not sleep! Please be quiet!' I kept trying to defend myself by incriminating my neighbor. We both had too much pride to back down, so I just left her standing and dashed into my room.

Even though we were told not to have any reading material in our rooms I had snuck in a copy of the Vipassana brochure. 'The course requires hard, serious work. There are three steps to the training. The first step is, for the period of the course, to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, speaking falsely, and intoxicants. This simple code of moral conduct serves to calm the mind, which otherwise would be too agitated to perform the task of self-observation.'

I sat on my bed and focused on my nostrils. They were both open and puffing. I was fuming. I meditated for a few minutes until I calmed down, then I went to bed. It took hard, serious work to relax and not think about my neighbor. Luckily, the next day's dharma talk would address the neighbor issue.

In the morning the gong came by at 4:00 am. The schedule was exactly the same as yesterday. The only difference was the day number, Mr. Goenka's dharma talk, and the lunch menu.

Day 2

Today in the meditation hall I started noticing sounds. Since we weren't allowed to open our eyes, I opened my ears. I heard occasional soft coughs from the women's side, a few harder coughs from the men's side. I heard a few people shifting their bodies as they got comfortable. I was jealous of their self-discipline. I still could not find a comfortable position and spent most of the day rearranging my body and leaning against the wall. When Mr. Goenka's voice told us to, I did the nostril thing. I was getting better at focusing my thoughts on my nostrils, but then wandered to thoughts of the mucous membranes inside my nostrils, the cells drying out but then recovering when the air flow shifted from the left to the right nostril and back again. I thought about cellular respiration, about the hemoglobin in red cells getting saturated with oxygen in the alveoli of the lungs then releasing the oxygen in the body's cells. Wow! I thought, this is what Vipassana is all about: getting so close to your body you can actually experience your cells.

During a break I went back to my room and read in the Vipassana brochure: 'The next step is to develop some mastery over the mind by learning to fix one's attention on the natural reality of the ever changing flow of breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. By the fourth day the mind is calmer and more focused, better able to undertake the practice of Vipassana itself: observing sensations throughout the body, understanding their nature, and developing equanimity by learning not to react to them. Finally, on the last full day participants learn the meditation of loving kindness or goodwill towards all, in which the purity developed during the course is shared with all beings.'

Lunch was lentil stew with deliciously seasoned roasted potatoes and homemade bread. Salad bar of course, and chocolate cake with frosting. I had seconds of the potatoes and cake.

During the afternoon group meditation I heard other noises. I did not look but I suspected that the row of men on the other side of me, with their backs to the walls, were also older people. I heard one of them burp very loudly. Then I heard gas coming out the other end. There was an audible wave of nervous little coughs from both sides. Well, after evening tea the same performance was repeated. I figured it was cultural and tried to close my mental ears for the rest of the meditation.

As it happened, Mr. Goenka's dharma talk that evening 'knew' what was going on with us. Along with his other words of encouragement he asked us to please consider the well being of our fellow students, to respect the silence of the retreat, to refrain from angry thoughts and actions, and to be careful with our body noises.

He also told us that we did not come to Vipassana for the food. Food was there, carefully prepared and served, to support our bodies while we learned to manage our thoughts and bodies. 'Yes, I know that the food is delicious. And many thanks to our volunteers who make it for us. Yes, you can go back for seconds and thirds if you wish. The volunteers are happy you like what they prepare. But now you are going to experience the world as it really is. You are going to master your body. Food will become your helper, not your center.'

The last meditation of that day, after the dharma talk, was pretty quiet.

Day 3

I woke up with the gong. I was comfortable not going to the meditation hall for the 4:30-6:30 am meditation so I stayed in my room. Now I could meditate while sitting, standing, lying down, or even pacing. (I was comfortable with this, as I'm used to thinking to myself while exercising, or waiting in lines, or even while driving). I paced inside the little room, making ovals and figures of eight. I opened the window to let the morning air in. My window faced east. Around 6:00 am dawn began. It was so beautiful. First grey, then dusty pink, then pink, yellow, and traces of blue. At 6:30 I hurried to breakfast but slowed down just before I got to the dining hall. This retreat isn't about food I reminded myself. I had something of everything again but this time I piled as much on my plate as possible. I wasn't going back for seconds.

Group meditation was as usual, with Mr. Goenka's voice leading. I spent most of the non-group meditation from now on in my room. During our free time I always walked 4 times around the walking path, completing a mile. I got to know the path pretty well. Not needing to acknowledge my fellow humans, I had the luxury of being forced to acknowledge nature. I saw a few lizards, more than a few ants, some rabbits, and a variety of brown birds. I saw lots of gravel, sand, rocks and dust. With time I saw how someone's hands had moved rocks to encircle the sparse plants still growing in this desert landscape in November. I saw cactus, desert scrub brush, and a fair amount of dead vegetation. We were told not to disturb anything, so I resisted picking up the dead stuff and throwing it in the trash. Occasionally I looked up to see the rocky peaks on one side and the sprawling valley and town of Twenty-Nine Palms on the other side.

I went back to the meditation hall for group meditation then to my room for personal meditation. At 11:00 am I was back in the dining hall. Lasagna!! Three types, with little post-its announcing regular, dairy-free, and gluten- and dairy-free. Also broccoli, salad, and vanilla cookies for dessert. I heaped on the regular lasagna and enjoyed myself immensely. Then I decided that if I ate just the gluten- and dairy-free lasagna it wouldn't count as seconds because it was so horrible.

That evening for the dharma talk Mr. Goenka announced that tomorrow, day 4, we were ready to begin the real Vipassana training, where we would learn to see things as they really are. I was ready for some excitement, but I had also gotten pretty good at calmly focusing attention on my nostrils.

Day 4

I got up with the gong, ready to learn something new. My heart was excited. I opened my window. It was dark, but somehow the darkness was light as well. I meditated as usual until breakfast. But this time I did not power walk to breakfast. I sauntered, and noticed a few of the plants outside my room and lining the walkway to the dining hall. The pink sky was really pretty I thought. I ate less today and felt just as filled as when I had needed seconds previously. I figured my metabolism was slowing down. Either that or the excitement of learning something new distracted my mind, and my stomach. I took my 4 lap walk around the path. Then we convened for the group meditation. After the initial sing-song chant, Mr. Goenka repeated that now we were ready to learn the real reason we came to Vipassana, the technique to see things as they really are. He instructed us to focus our minds on the top of our heads, the place where our bones were soft and open when we were newborns, the fontanelle. I could feel my energy straining to focus my mind on the top of my head.

He then told us to start taking a mental survey of our whole body, starting from the top of the head, then circling out to observe the whole scalp, then our ears, one at a time, then moving to our forehead, face, chin, back of the neck, front of the neck, right shoulder and down the arm to the elbow, forearm, wrist, and each individual finger starting with the thumb, then to the left side, the left shoulder, down the arm to the elbow, forearm, wrist, each individual finger starting with the thumb, then the chest, surveying it with the mind carefully, then the lower torso, then the upper back, then the bottom and between the legs, then the right leg front and back, the right knee and behind the right knee, right ankle, right foot, right toes starting with the big toe and surveying each toe separately, then the left leg front and back, the left knee front and behind, left ankle, left foot, left toes starting with the big toe and surveying each toe separately.

As I worked my mind from the top to the bottom I 'noticed' that my scalp was quite dark, my face light, my neck front and back were light but thick, like a weight lifter's; and my chest was light. In fact my whole body except my scalp and fingers were light. I 'saw' my fingers as dark and skinny, almost like black bones. And my arms and legs 'looked' oddly short.

Mr. Goenka continued his instructions: 'Now come back up the body in reverse order and survey each part of your body as you did going down.'

It couldn't have taken more than 10 minutes but at the end I was exhausted. I finished the hour trying to practice the visualization technique a couple of more times.

Luckily my group of new female students was allowed to leave the hall. I power walked back to my room and did the next 2 hours of personal meditation flat on my back. My mind was sore. By lunch time I was starving, and I almost power walked to the dining hall but recovered enough in my room to think clearly and slow down. I remembered being taught in medical school that the brain can use a large amount of energy when activated. So I was actually burning through calories during that meditation. Lunch was baked tofu with a tasty bar-b-que sauce, braised Napa cabbage, corn bread, salad, and carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. I needed every bite, and piled my plate high. The rest of the group meditation was more Vipassana technique practice with Mr. Goenka's guidance.

That night's dharma talk Mr. Goenka told us stories about his enlightenment as his own ability to self-survey matured. He saw how his own body got reactive, itchy, irritated and painful, but those sensations eventually peaked and then faded away. That's the secret. They fade away. With guidance, practice and awareness, your body's sensations will almost always go away. Of course if something really bad is happening you need to intervene to protect your body from harm, or get help to repair it. But in the vast majority of your existence your sensations are fleeting and manageable.

Mr. Goenka had probably mentioned this in earlier dharma talks, but today I was listening. He said that your personal experience with egolessness, impermanence and suffering lead gradually to enlightenment. After a while, the path gets easier and straighter.

Personal power gets easier as well. Personal power over your own body and its sensations. Personal power over your body's reactions. Personal power over your interactions with others. It's all about personal power, power over your own person.

Day 5

During the morning group meditation Mr. Goenka started with his usual chant. He then quickly asked that we do something very hard but very important. He asked that for the entire rest of the hour of that meditation we stay completely still. No fidgeting, no rearranging our bodies, keeping our eyes closed and our minds focused on our body survey. I felt a bit panicky. Or rather my body gave the sensation of panic: my heart rate increased, my muscles tensed, my brain was on high alert and I felt an anxiety attack bubbling up. I was used to fidgeting to get comfortable. Not fighting it. While we sat still Mr. Goenka guided us for a short time, but most of the hour we were completely in our heads. After almost unbearable torture, and my mind repeating 'egolessness, impermanence and suffering', I knew the end of the hour approached when I heard the master beginning to chant his sing-song. Hallelujah! I also heard people around me sighing. I stayed still until Mr. Goenka's voice congratulated us for having completed the exercise. He said our bodies were now trained to do our bidding. We wouldn't have to do that again unless we repeated the course.

I stayed in the hall until lunchtime. I had to bully my panic attack. I stayed perfectly still for another 55 minutes. Mission accomplished. Afterwards lunch and tea were refreshing. Mr. Goenka's dharma talk that evening was very upbeat. We had passed the halfway mark.

Day 6

The next morning I opened the window and heard a bird chirping. I don't normally notice birds chirping. I stayed in my room for the personal meditation. I thought briefly about my neighbor who had chewed me out; anger bubbled up but faded away. My normally anxious body was calm.

Something had definitely changed. I tend to get overly excited about things, disasterizing the mundane. I began to 'see' that I, together with my body, are partners in how 'we' respond to the environment. But 'I' am the one in control, unless I let my body do the controlling. Last night Mr. Goenka said essentially the same thing. Now I was manifesting the control. I was beginning to self-transform through self-observation.

I thoroughly enjoyed breakfast and lunch that day. I did not go back for seconds. I did not pile my plate high. I enjoyed the food one excellent bite at a time. I slowed down to chew and notice the flavors and textures. I drank my cup of tea before, during and after my meal, instead of gulping it down after eating. I didn't even know I was gulping until I consciously didn't gulp. (Lunch was Chinese mixed veggies with tofu, green beans with mushrooms, salad, and almond cookies.)

Day 7

The day started out fine. Meditation. Breakfast. Meditation. Lunch (lentil and vegetable soup, potatoes au gratin, green beans again (must have had leftovers), salad, and chocolate pudding).

After lunch I took my walk. More plants, rocks, landscape and critters became obvious. But then I got a shock: one of the ant holes that I had been watching on the path had a long sharp stick stuck into it. It was an act of violence I had not seen before. I think one of the women tried to kill some ants. No one removed the stick, although I was tempted to do so. But for the rest of the course I passed that ant hole with the stick in it and

felt bad for the ants, and angry about the woman. I was also grateful that I didn't need to stay here forever and worry about ant's feelings. I thought briefly about the Jain sect of Hinduism that did worry about ant's feelings. I was comforted that at least someone on earth did.

That afternoon I stayed in the meditation hall. I felt I needed comfort in numbers. As I was heading toward the hall I noticed a sandstorm in the distance. It was sunny and bright where we were. But in the valley of Twenty-Nine Palms I could see a cloud of orange dust kicking up. As this was November, the weather was a bit chilly and windy. Today it was windier than usual. I went into the meditation hall and took my place. I was getting pretty good at sitting still. I wasn't as exhausted doing my body survey, and I did it quicker. But during the second hour something very strange happened. My thoughts had deteriorated to some bad stuff, as usual, but instead of popping away from them I felt my body getting really heavy, start to shrink, and then collapse, like a grape dehydrating and shriveling up into a raisin. My body eventually crumpled up into a little ball. I knew that if I put my mind to it I could snap out of it and end the weirdness. I had after all learned to dominate my body. But I decided to let this scenario play out, especially since I was in the very back and nobody saw me crumple except me. I kept shriveling and crumpling, until I eventually started drooling and then I caught a glimpse of a little dark bearded man in the corner of my 'vision.' He was smiling meanly. I did not recognize him. But I decided enough was enough and straightened up. It was free time meditation so I got up with some difficulty and went outside. The sandstorm had reached us and I went out into it. In retrospect I believe that something bad inside me was emptying out of me, and the detritus was being carried away with the sandstorm, to be scattered and composted on the desert floor. Sorry. Maybe I'm not the only one with weirdness. At least I could be honest with myself that day.

After that episode, for lack of a better description, I felt cleaner. I occasionally spend time at Korean spas back in Los Angeles, soaking for hours in hot and cold water, and then getting my body scrubbed by fierce Korean women. I felt like this now. But instead of my body getting scrubbed my mind got scrubbed. Or maybe it was my soul. I have no idea which, just that it happened.

Mr. Goenka continued his chanting during the group meditations, and gave his dharma talk in the evening. I felt a wave of gratitude for him. I thought about the donation I would give at the end of the course. You have the option to do the course for free, or donate whatever amount you feel is worthy. Throughout the millenia, the founders of Vipassana, and many other spiritual traditions, did their work for free, seeing that people are often in need of spiritual instruction but not having the means to pay for it. This philosophy has worked beautifully, because you pay what you can afford only after you have gone through the promised instruction. It turns out that the vast majority of people who've gone through Vipassana freely donate enough money to fund a growing number of Vipassana centers worldwide. In addition, all who work there do so for free. It is an all volunteer organization. Something is obviously going right. So I went back to how much I would donate. Up until that day I thought I would donate the amount I would have paid for rent for a small cabin on federal forest land. Then I factored in food costs. I had been eating a lot but not more than my fair share. So not a huge amount for food. The past week I had been agitating off and on how much I would pay. What's reasonable? With each passing day I felt more and more grateful. I keep inflating the amount. My husband would kill me if I gave what I felt this experience deserved. It just kept getting more valuable. Well, I settled on \$30 a day (\$300 total). But then I promised I would volunteer in the future and pay the rest of my debt that way. I have yet to do this, but then maybe I can send them another check.

Day 8

I woke up thinking about my mother. My mother had passed away 10 days ago, just before starting this course. I was pulled back into sadness. I had had a nice talk with her shortly before she died. She was 90 years old, and had been in a nursing home for the prior 2 years. She had had a series of small strokes over the prior 6 years and was not as mentally sharp as she had been before the strokes. But she was still feisty and animated. I loved

my mother very much, but we hadn't always had the most benign relationship. I was the middle child of three, the oldest daughter, my brother being the oldest child. I always felt a strong competition with my mother, even a fierceness, like a wild animal. English was not her first language, and I remember frequently making fun of her accent. I also remember as a child trying to bend off her lovely and carefully painted and trimmed nails. In retrospect I realize that she was extraordinarily patient with me. Yes she had spanked me for bad behavior, and when I remained bad she waited until my dad came home from work to spank me again. I don't recall being spanked often, but I do recall doing pretty bad things that justified the spankings. But I still felt my relationship with her was strained. When she began having health problems I had pretty mixed feelings: sad at her deteriorating health, but also an unmentionable, decidedly hostile feeling that disturbed me, about myself. I decided to confront this unmentionable feeling in today's meditations. What emerged though was pretty darn weird. You be the judge if it explains the unmentionable.

The morning meditations went by pretty well. A few bubbles of bad thoughts and feelings quickly popped away. Lunch was, believe it or not, my favorite food of all times, cheesy noodles, complete with buttered bread crumbs toasted perfectly on top. There was even my favorite drug, chocolate, in the form of moist chocolate cake with butter frosting. Little did I know I was about to discover not who I really was but what I really was. I needed all the love I could get.

After my walk, I went into the meditation hall for the self-guided meditation. Most of the spaces were filled, as usual, with my fellow meditators. I took my place and settled into my pillows. I closed my eyes and started my nostril focus. I then started my mental body survey. I started on the top of my head as usual. But I noticed that in addition to being dark, my scalp was covered in stubby hairs. I could not 'see' my face or ears. The 'image' of the back of my neck got really thick, and was covered in stubby tan hairs. The rest of my body seemed also to be covered in this stubby tan hair, and my fingers, which I had consistently 'seen' as dark bones I could now 'see' as long nails. The final 'image' though was of my ears. I hadn't 'seen' them earlier. Now I could 'see' that they were pointed, tufted with tan fur. I never 'saw' my face, but at this point I got an image of a large misshapen bobcat in my mind. Yes, the mental image of my body at that moment was of a bobcat. A snarly bobcat. I felt sad for my mother.

Day 9

Well, weird is how life is. Mr. Goenka did not quite say it outright, but the many experiences he related about himself, his students, and life in general corroborated the weirdness, but also the goodness. At the end of his talks he always said, 'May all beings be happy!'

Day 9 was the day before the last day, before we broke the silence. Mr. Goenka said this day was most important because on it we worked to bring ourselves back to the world of others. Our meditations were now focused on our relationships with others, visualizing how we were to interact with others and our environment carefully, respectfully, responsibly.

Day 10

I was looking forward to meeting and speaking to my fellow classmates. But I also had enjoyed the solitude of getting to know myself in the midst of so many other people. I had felt safe, just as we were told to make others safe by adhering to the strict code of conduct. The day began as usual at 4 am with the gong. We did our meditation, then continued with breakfast in silence. There were signs throughout the campus to remind us to remain silent until lunch, when we could break the silence. The signs also asked us to volunteer if we wanted to do final kitchen and grounds clean-up the following morning, after which we were free to go home. Some participants needed to go home first thing in the morning. My carpool mate and I signed up for kitchen clean-up duty.

Lunch was obviously left-overs, so we had a large assortment of cuisines from previous days. I looked up into the faces of the women I had sat next to in the dining room for the past week and a half. It was a bit uncomfortable, because we had gotten used to our personal space. But we introduced ourselves and shared some interesting personal experiences.

In the evening the men and women got together on the men's side of the dining room. One man, with long white hair and tanned skin came over to me and introduced himself as the guy sitting next to me in the meditation hall. Someone had cheated after all I thought. But then he was so nice and friendly that I popped that bubble and replaced it with a smile. He said he was a massage therapist, and this was his third ten-day Vipassana course. He said he learns something life-changing and valuable each time he attends. And even though he tries diligently to keep up his meditation on his own, he appreciates additional courses to refresh.

I found out that many of the attendees are in some sort of health care, therapeutic, alternative medicine or caregiving field.

In his last dharma talk, Mr. Goenka seemed to share our excitement over completing the course. He asked that we continue the practice from now on, or at least whenever we need a boost.

The Last Morning

The morning after Day 10 we had our usual breakfast in the dining hall. My carpool mate and I cleaned our rooms, packed our bags and put them into the car. We then gathered in the kitchen for clean-up duty. The kitchen was enormous. The kitchen volunteers put us to work taking apart the industrial cast iron stove top, and scrubbing and washing everything in the industrial sinks. They said the kitchen was built for many times the rooms there are now. Many Vipassana centers were built that way, anticipating growing numbers of people wanting to do the course. They were right. The wait list for each course is long.

On the drive home, we recapped our experiences. On the way to the retreat we had gotten to know each another superficially: jobs, family, hobbies, likes and dislikes. On the way home, I told her about my weird experiences. She listened without judging. I found out that she in turn had confronted a significant skeleton in her family history. An uncle had murdered someone many, many decades ago, when he was a young adult. Since then the whole extended family began crushing under the burden. It weighed on my friend's existence as well. She thinks she may even have chosen a nomadic life of motorcycles and wandering to escape reality. During the meditations she had multiple episodes of anxiety, reliving her hateful burden. But with each day she was able to stand outside of and alongside the feelings, dissipating them. Could she have had a richer life if she had done Vipassana earlier?

If you have the time, and the inclination, it's a great way to learn meditation, and a great way to learn about your 'other' self. I highly recommend it.