

MY TEN DAY MEDITATION RETREAT

I first heard about the Vipassana Meditation retreat from a couple I met at a Non-Violent Communication workshop [Marshall Rosenberg] in Atlanta. They were very enthusiastic about it and I thought “well if they made it through 10 days of silence, maybe I can.” I have not been a good meditation devotee. Unless I was meditating in a group, I couldn’t sit for more than 5 minutes without hoping up to get something to eat or get a pencil and paper to make my “to do” list for the day. I had heard about 10 day silent retreats over the years from various people I had admired for their spiritual qualities so I decided to take the leap and commit to do it.

I went online and found the Southeast Vipassana Association in Jesup, GA. There was a retreat scheduled for almost every month. I picked the one in November as the midterm elections would be over. I did not realize it at the time I registered just how depressed I would be at the outcome of the political elections. And how deeply I would be looking for answers to living a meaningful life.

This particular meditation session was advertised for East Indians and I didn’t know if I could get in. However, I was accepted so when November rolled around, I pack up my loosest comfortable clothes and off I go.

I arrive shortly before supper and get my room assignment and make up my bed in the women’s dorm. Then I hear a gong and we are told to go to the dining hall. I am standing around a little awkward, not knowing anyone and this young woman touches my elbow and says “I think I know you from somewhere.” I don’t recognize her but there is something so fresh and unique about her that I just smile and tell her my name. She says her name is Karen and I at age of 69 look across the time of distance at her youthfulness so free of life’s draining experiences and the eagerness in her face to live the unknown adventures that lay before her. Then I realize that I do know her not as Karen but as Ellie Taylor. This is my dear friend, Ellie, as she must have been at age 22. The movements, the energy, the laughter, the banter. They are all the spitting image of Ellie. I am stunned at the resemblance.

The women eat and sleep in one dining hall and dorm and the men in theirs. Our paths do not cross anywhere on campus except in the meditation hall. The men sit on one side, the women on the other with separate entrances. We women wait in the hall leading to the meditation room. We are told we can take the shawls hanging on hooks to wrap in and keep warm. The gong is bonged. A chair scrapes against the floor in one of the dorm rooms behind us and someone jokes about the new sound of the gong. We enter the dimly lit meditation room. There are double cushions on the floor in neat rows for each person to sit. I find my name printed in front of a set of double cushions- a half cushion on top of a larger square cushion. We sit. The male and female instructors enter from the door at the front of the room and sit on their raised cushions. They are very kind and loving looking people. We listen to a video tape of Mr. S. N. Goenka as he begins to teach us in his thickly Indian accented English, the technique and code of discipline for the Vipassana Meditation, the meditation discovered by The Buddha 2500 years ago to end human suffering. We are to breath normally through the nostrils. The right nostril, or the left nostril, or both nostrils simultaneously. We are to be alert to any sensations: tingling, tickling, the air passing over the skin, anything. We are to pay attention. We sit in silence for an hour.

After about 10 minutes, my back begins to hurt. At the end of the hour, we are instructed that Nobel Silence has begun. We are not to talk for the next 10 days.

I look over the schedule: The gong awakens us at 4am. Meditation in the hall or in our room from 4:30 to 6:30. Then breakfast and free time until 8am. Group meditation from 8 to 9. Instructional meditation from 9 – 11am. Lunch at 11. Interviews with the teachers from 12 to 1. Meditation in the hall or in our room from 1 til 2:30. Group meditation from 2:30 to 3:30. Meditate in the hall or our room from 3:30 to 5pm. Tea break from 5 to 6. Group meditation from 6 to 7. Teacher's discourse in the hall from 7 to 8:15pm. Group meditation from 8:15 to 9pm. Lights out at 9:30.

I am awoken all too early by the 4am gong. I am fortunate. I am in a room with only one other woman. She is an East Indian woman about my age. She has a very kind face. She gestures to me to get up. I go down the hall and wait in line for the bathroom. I notice that most of the other women are young – in their 20's or 30's. I am surprised by this. So young and so into meditation!

The gong rings again and we file into the meditation room. I run back to my room and grab my pillow to put on top of my cushions. I sit in my place at the back of the first row next to the center isle. Somehow I make it through the 2 hours sit, trying out every position possible to get comfortable.

Breakfast in the dining room, is granola, yogurt and tea. Then meditation for the next hour during which time I fall asleep at least 20 times. We are given a 5 minute break. Everyone heads to the bathroom. I grab another cushion for my growing back ache. 9 to 11 meditation I do a little better to stay awake and to pay attention to my nostrils, my breathing. After lunch I walk around the yard outside our dorm. I notice that the ground is sand, the trees and grasses glisten in the sun. There are signs everywhere stating "Course Boundary." We are obviously never to wander beyond the signs. The signs border the yard and the trail from the dorm to the dining hall. Many of the young women are laid out flat on the ground in the yard. I'm not the only one dealing with back aches and sleeping eyes. There is supposed to be a walking trail somewhere but I don't find it.

The gong rings again. We sit. And gongs again. We sit again. After 5pm tea which is a banana and half a pear we sit for the evening discourse by Mr. Goenka. He tells us day 1 is over. He tells us to be very alert, diligent, and attentive to our nostrils. Pay attention to the sensations. Any sensations. If we are not feeling sensations, to breath a little deeper, stronger. Focus on the triangle area of the nose. Be alert for physical sensations.

During the break, I move my pile of cushions and pillows up against the back wall. My back is refusing to hold itself upright without screaming pain. I sit on the aisle so I sometimes watch the men. One of them has dreadlocks down to his waste. He sits so quietly, so admirably still.

Day 2: 4:30am: I try again. I do a little better with my back propped against the wall. At breakfast I add some coffee to my tea to keep me awake. Later that morning the instructors call us up by 3's to the front and quietly ask "Do you feel the breath?" My mind panics! Feel the breath? I've been focusing on my breath for the past 24 hours! Is the question that simple? Or Is there another breath I'm supposed to feel? So I answer "No", while everyone else answers "yes".

At the next hour's meditation Goenka chants to us in Hindi. I'm beginning to like him. He's not like your typical Guru. His hair is cut short on the sides. No mustache, no beard, no turban, no long white robe. He wears a plain shirt and Indian trousers. He tells us his father was a business man. He himself was a business man but then he changed. In the business community it is said that the market is good if the availability goes down and the prices go up and the market is bad if there is plenty of the product and the prices go down. What is good for the people is bad for the businessman. Days later we learn that this business way of thinking gave him a migraine headache. No doctor could cure his headache. He was only cured when he learned to meditate. He is sincere and seems to care very much about his message.

I fall asleep many times during the next meditation and my mind thinks of horrible things that must be happening out there in my other world while I am away and not there to take care of the emergencies. Thinking of this makes my body temperature rise and I nearly pass out worrying about what must surely be true. In between all the thinking and jerking awake at the approach of sleep, I realize that there is not much time left during the 'sit' to be focusing on my nostrils. By noon, I request an interview with the instructors. I tell them that I am beginning to doubt that I can learn how to meditate and ask for guidance. With tears beginning to swell up in my eyes I ask if I will be able to make it. Ten days of meditation and Enlightenment seem very unattainable. They are very kind and tell me to breathe with a little more force for a short time and then breath normally and to practice that way.

Day 3: The early mornings are cold but by 11 the sun has warmed the air. There is a table with chairs outside the dining hall for those who wish to eat outside. I notice that Karen and I prefer to eat outside. The Indian women are beginning to join us. After the meal one of the Indian women squats on the edge of the patio and taking a piece of bark, scrapes a clearing on the sand. She then draws a sunrise with rays of light and flying birds on the sand. For the rest of the time there, no one ever steps on it.

Mr. Goenko chants to us at the beginning and ending of the 3 main meditations. Then he tells us to "start again, start again. Breathe in through the nostrils. Be alert, be diligent, be aware of the sensations, pay attention to the sensations."

My question for the instructors today is about how to deal with the pain and discomfort in sitting. I am told to use the pain like a scientist. Explore the edges of the pain. Where is it? Where does it start? How far this way and that? Where is it more intense? Do not react to the pain. Observe it. Same thing when you feel an emotion like anger. Do not react to the anger, observe it. Same with fear. Pay attention to the bodily sensations. Explore the edges. Breath into them.

During the break after lunch I discover the women's walking path. I notice that several other women have discovered it too. There are "Course Boundary" signs along the edges of the trail. In our silence, our supervised meditation schedule and within the restricted boundaries, I am beginning to feel we are living like nuns in a cloister. The walking path is a good ten minute walk all the way out and back. Part of it is broken up by logs and trees and places to lie down and stretch out. We all walk alone. Silent.

Day 4: I am putting coffee in my tea every morning now. Meditation takes commitment. We are breathing through the nostrils, paying attention to any sensations. I practice on the pain in my back. It is here and extends to there. I play with its edges. It lessens. Goenka says everything changes. Pay attention and it will dissipate. Start again. Start again. We are to be given a special message from Mr. Goenka later on today.

After lunch I take to the walking path. I pick a piece of lacy weed and place it on top of the 'Course Boundary' sign. It looks lonely. So I add a piece of tree bark. Karen has found the spot I like. But there is another spot around another log. I lie down and pick out shapes in the clouds, a beautiful long human shape appears.

Evening Discourse: Finally the moment has arrived. The big jewel is to be delivered. We ask God to give us the wisdom of the Buddha. The path to Nirvana. I am finally to learn the secret of Enlightenment that would deliver us from our misery. We begin with the usual breathing through the nostrils, being alert, attentive to sensations. Then we are instructed to move our attention to the top of the head; to the soft spot that is open when a baby is born. Be aware of sensation. Now slowly begin to move down the head, the face, the neck, the shoulders, the arms to the hands, the chest, the belly, move the attention down the legs to the toes. Pay attention to any gross sensations, any small sensations. Be alert, be diligent, be aware. I begin to swing my attention like a silver ball on a chain back and forth, back and forth; from the top of my head and moving downward. I am just about completing the sweeping and scanning of my body when a voice in my head says to me:

"Are you nuts? You aren't feeling anything. This is just your old body. There is no secret here. You've known me for 69 years and I've got no path to enlightenment you haven't discovered before." I start once again.

Starting at the top of the head, moving downward. By the time I am down to my shoulders I am beginning to feel like a balloon with a small leak, getting more deflated by the second. What do sensations in my body have to do with delivering me from misery? – emotional misery! I should be just doing what he said to do but I'm missing some logic here. This isn't mystical! This is too simple! There is a piece missing in my spiritual path and it is growing.

Dismissed to our banana dinner, I look into the other women's faces. Dismay is appearing on everyone's face where such eager anticipation had once made their eyes dance. People turn their chairs away from one another so we would not have to face each other.

My willingness to give Mr. Goenka more time is tested further by what comes next. Back in the meditation hall we are instructed in the rules of a new game. The game is called "Don't Move." We are to follow the path of the Buddha who said "I will sit under this tree and not move a muscle until I find the path to Enlightenment." We are to not move a muscle during each of the 3 main meditations during the day.

Mr. Goenka's message this evening begins to gather up the fraying edges of my spiritual commitment to meditation. "The patterns of the mind are very deep", he says. "If you want to get rid of a tree, you must get out all its roots. If you cut off only the branches, it will grow many more branches." "The more alert the mind becomes, the more the patterns of the mind will change. The mind's attention to every part of the body, noticing

any sensation, noticing every sensation, allows the mind to become more alert and allows the mind to change and be free of its patterns, free of its egoic thinking.

Day 5: I sleep in until 6:30 this morning. I drink more coffee at breakfast. More people than usual have signed up to talk to the instructors at noontime. I sign up too. I add a small wooden bench under my cushions to get me up higher off the floor while sitting. I practice sitting without a cushion behind my back. I explore each pain. It dissipates. I move my attention to another pain and play with it too. At the end of the sit I walk outside to the tall lacy weeds and the trees and ask them how can they possibly stay so still and not walk around day after day, day after day? How they must love a breeze that sways them back and forth.

The gong is sounded. We start once again. I start my attention at the top of my head. I swing my silver ball of attention back and forth, back and forth; descending with every swing. I pay attention to every sensation. Explore it and Move on. Goenka says to not get attached to any sensation, pleasant or unpleasant. Develop no craving, create no emotion. Equanimity is the goal.

A few of us students continue to meditate for a long time this afternoon after most had left the session. Were they praying as hard as I? I am feeling so desperate for spiritual help.

At our fruit dinner everyone is looking so distant. When we were silent for the first 4 days there was still so much communication between us. The energy in the air was full of connections. I catch the eye of one Indian woman looking at me. She is so beautiful with her olive skin and black silk hair surrounding her delicate face. Her eyes are so deep and dark. She looks so terribly, terribly sad. I don't know if she is looking at the sadness in me or I am recognizing my own sadness in her. I turn my head away as tears seep out and fall.

In the evening discourse Goenka says that life's experience is miserable due to the mind wanting, needing, and craving. The egoic mind does not know real happiness. It is trying to relieve its misery but only creates more misery. Life keeps being born and dying, over and over again. The energy created by clinging and craving propels life to be born again. Each life's purpose is to lesson misery. We are to release the mind from creating misery.

Day 6: I go to 4:30am meditation. I am the only woman in the hall. By 4:45 a few more women come in. By 5:15 I go back to bed. At breakfast, I put my name down to speak to the instructors.

I tell the instructors that I just don't get the connection between the sensations in my body and how that will bring me out of misery. The bridge is missing. She says that Goenka talks about undoing the knots in the body and not creating new knots. Paying attention to the sensations helps one to observe without reacting. Paying attention to the sensations calms the sensation, reduces the emotion, and allows you to act and not react.

Reaction happens when you are overcome by emotion. Action happens when you are aware of the emotion but not controlled by it. Don't hang on to things. Let them go. When it is Summer you say, I like Summer. And now Winter is coming. You must let Summer go. Observe and do not react. The usual pattern is to react, to resist. We now have another choice...

I go for a walk and almost step on a thin green snake. She is a little over a foot long. She stops, motionless. She doesn't move a muscle, she is very alert. I don't move either. After a long while she begins to move her head back and forth ever so slightly. Then stops. Then starts again. This time increasing the range of motion. Soon her whole body follows this side to side motion as she slides off into the brush.

Was she demonstrating the meditation for me?

Day 7: I sit with less experience of pain today. Afterward, I take my towel out on the walking path and find a place to lie down. I light rain begins to fall. Ping, ping – drops fall on my skin. I only feel each drop when it hits, then no more. I smile at my pathetic self asking the instructors “will I make it?” How innocent of me. Their encouraging assurance is “of course. It's just like learning how to ride a bike. It takes only a little practice.” I think of Eckhart Tolle describing the ego like a dog that enjoys chewing on a bone of worry, fear and pain. I know for certain, my ego mind is addicted to worry, fear and pain. Eckhart also talks about the portal that is found by going within the body – inner body awareness. The path to our true Self is found by going within the body, in the alert moment of now.

The “Course Boundary” signs along the walking trail are being decorated with branches, bark and sprigs of weeds. This softens their message of rules into opportunities of creativity. Unable to un-silence our mouths, our spirits are eking out kindly expressions.

Day 8: My Question for this day: “Tell me in your own words what is Enlightenment?” She says it is untying knots in the body and not creating new ones. Being present in the moment, now. Being able to act and not react. This is Experiential knowing.

He says practicing meditation will develop your own compassion, kindness, joyous loving and peaceful equanimity. Other things such as emotions of tension and anxiety will fall away. Your equanimity will increase. I realize that this meditation practice is boot camp for childbirth or Nelson Mandela's imprisonment or for that matter most people's lives!

Day 9: Today's message from Goenka is to accept what is without creating more energy from the circumstance. This 'sukara' energy brings you to be reborn onto this planet of misery. Each one is to stop this cycle by reducing the negative energy – physical, mental, and emotional. Be alert. Recognize the pain. Do not avoid the pain. Do not become the pain or the pain becomes you. The objective is not to suppress the emotion. Observe the respiration changes, the physical changes, the biochemical changes in your body. Recognize the thoughts that keep the emotion going and growing. Do not create more emotional 'sukara'. Realize that all things change. The emotion will dissipate. Accept what is; do not cling to what is changing, do not crave what is not here. Deep into the rhythm of my meditation, I sense the outer layer of me lifting like a dim morning mist. My clothing, my skin and my body turning into cloud and lifting. As if I were a fruit being effortless peeled. I know this is ego or self-identity leaving me.

Evening discourse with Goenka: His message is that our true energy, our deepest energy is pure love, joy, peace, and tranquility. This is my truly being. This is what I share with everyone.

Day 10: After morning stillness meditation we are now free from Nobel Silence. I am not ready to talk though. I head for the walking path. I hear a voice singing like a clear bell ringing out strong and happy ahead of me. It is Karen heading for her favorite log. She sings out like she can't help herself be so happy. I sit and listen. After awhile she sees me and invites me to join her. I can't think of any song I want to sing. But then I start to make up songs. They are like Spirituals. This is odd. I've never done this before. But the songs come so easily. I just make them up out of nothing. Karen sings, I sing. We talk. We are glad to share our breaking of silence together. I tell Karen about Ellie. I tell Karen she does not know me yet. She will not meet me until much later in her life. But to look for me. I'll be there and we will become good friends just like Ellie and me.

We all meet once again for meditation. Goenka leads us once more through meditation with his chanting.

Verifying our true being of energy: joy, love, peace, happiness and equanimity. Sharing our being by blessing everyone we know. Asking forgiveness for all pain we have ever caused, intentional or not.

I am on a very light-hearted high driving home. I am hoping that the ride will last for years rather than six hours. My mind feels very expansive and I feel happy. I enjoy meditating now. I have found a way to step beyond the patterns of my egoic mind and float freely for awhile.

Rosellen