

VIPASSANA MEDITATION:

My Experiences at a 10-Day Retreat

by

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Vipassana Meditation: My Experiences at a 10-Day Retreat

I wrote this essay to give you information about a meditation course. My intent is not to condemn or condone the technique described, or the organization behind it. I try to be clear and honest about my experiences. Ten days is a large commitment of time and energy, so I'm telling you everything I wish I'd known before attending. Whether you choose to do the course or not, I wish you the best in your practices.

I learned about the course while traveling around the US. I encountered several people who had taken part in a meditation retreat that used a technique known as *Vipassana*. I have meditated for many years using methods I describe in *Cheat Codes For Life*, but the endorsement of the people I met and the description of Vipassana proffered by Wikipedia sparked my interest. I was later to learn that word of mouth is a major form of advertising for the course.

Wikipedia describes Vipassana as "one of the world's most ancient techniques of meditation, which was re-discovered by Gautama Buddha. It is a practice of self-transformation through self-observation and introspection to the extent that sitting with a steadfast mind becomes an active experience of change and impermanence."

This interested me. How could I be sure that the meditation style I used (since there are many techniques for meditation) was the best? I am an advocate of personal experimentation, so I have tried many things over the years, and Vipassana looked like a good candidate for exploration.

I went to the organization's website, a simple clean-cut affair. It introduces Vipassana meditation and gives a general picture of the 10-day course. The site also lists where courses are offered in countries around the world, and provides an application form. Since I was planning a trip to Asia for five months, I decided to apply for a course in one of the countries I'd be visiting. I first applied for a Thailand course, but because of flooding there, applications were not being taken. I next applied for a course in Cambodia, but found that that course was full. Finally I applied for a course near Kyoto, Japan, and was admitted. It would take place in the winter.

To get to the course site from Kyoto, I first took a train. Most of my time in Japan had been spent in cities (Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Nara and Kyoto), and I looked forward to getting away from all that. Japanese cities are some of the quietest and most beautiful cities in the world – especially compared to other Asian cities – but they are still cities. As the train tunneled through mountains and gave me glimpses of forests and farmland, I was glad to get away from cars and the endless flow of people. From the train station I bussed to a small town, and from there I awaited a shuttle to the retreat.

I instantly recognized other would-be meditators waiting for the shuttle. They were mainly Japanese and had a demeanor no doubt similar to my own: earnest, and eager to tackle ten days of meditation. For me, I anticipated a lot of work in the course, but also a good deal of relief. I'd been traveling through Asia for three months at that point and didn't always have the opportunity to meditate. Either noise, lack of privacy, or other circumstances kept me from the regular practice that I enjoyed before my travels began. Perhaps these are only excuses, but I don't think anyone can deny that some situations make meditation more accessible. Travel can be enlightening in its own way, but after a while I long for a place to rest my hat and get down to work.

The shuttle finally showed up. Men and women got in together, but the driver soon corrected them and asked that the men not sit next to the women. Part of the course involves separation by gender, and apparently this had already taken effect. We rolled through the hills on curvy roads. Japan's nature is incredibly beautiful, and this seemed like the ideal location for the course. I expected fairly minimal housing. If anything, I had low expectations. It was cold and I'd brought a shawl along in case I needed it in the meditation hall, or even as a blanket when I slept.

I needn't have worried. I can't speak for the other retreats around the world, but mine was pretty nice. My first impression was that it looked like a nice lodge at any mountain resort. There were a few buildings, and I soon saw where I would be spending all my time for the next ten days. The first place we (the other men and I) went was the dining hall. We signed in and were given a general overview of where things were. The bathrooms and showers were in a small building, and the meditation hall and sleeping quarters were in the large main building. Along with the dining hall and a small walking area outside, these four places are where I would be for the next ten days.

As we signed in, we were asked to read over the "Code of Discipline" again and make sure we could abide by its tenets. Let me hit the main points:

You agree to accept the teacher and technique taught at the course. You must trust the teacher and meditate exactly as asked.

You must suspend other techniques, rites, and forms of worship while at the course. You should not mix Vipassana with other forms of meditation, so that it may be given a fair trial.

You will not communicate with others for the 10-day period of the course, except as necessary. You will be given instruction, but should only speak during interviews with the teacher to clarify the meditation technique, and to the retreat manager to address problems or issues. You will not read, write, or listen to music. You will not use computers, cell phones, gestures, sign language, or any other communication. No photography or filming. Physical contact will be avoided.

Men and women will be in separate areas for dining, sleep, and restrooms. They will be in the same meditation hall, but on separate sides of the room.

Physical exercise shall be limited to stretching and light walking in the outside area. Yoga and strenuous exercise will be suspended for the course.

Religious objects should not be brought to the course.

Clothing should be simple.

You will have no contact with the outside world (civilization) during the course.

In addition to these rule, there are "Five Precepts" that should be observed:

1. *No killing.*
2. *No stealing.*
3. *No sexual activity (not sure if this includes masturbation).*
4. *No lying.*
5. *No intoxicants.*

I had no problem agreeing to all this. My only concern was if the teacher asked me to do something too cult-y that I couldn't go along with, but I would handle that if it arose (it never did).

It was also made clear that I should not begin the course unless I intended to complete it, that I should turn back now or stick it out. No pussyfooting! The retreat is "not a rest cure, a holiday, or an opportunity for socialising. It is not an escape from the trials and tribulations of everyday life." I was glad to see them so forthright about it. Ten days of sitting is no walk in the park.

Before going to the sleeping quarters, I was asked to turn over my wallet and any prohibited materials I might have with me. Since I had all my travel belongings with me, I'd been forced to bring my laptop and some books – strictly verboten. I wasn't clear why they needed my wallet – perhaps so I wouldn't sully my hands with lucre, or to keep me from rereading the obscure minutiae on my dollar bills and yen. All of the wallets and cell phones were placed in a bag, and this seemed like a very easy target for any thief who might be in our midst. Perhaps they were kept in a lock box or safe... but still, it seems like they were asking for trouble.

I decided to give them my entire backpack with my wallet and computer inside, secured with a small lock. Obviously anyone could take the entire bag and cut it open, but at least they wouldn't be able to rifle through it without me *knowing* they had done so. Honestly, I wasn't too worried about it. The people there seemed very honest and I don't think they'd be at the program unless they were ready to follow its code of conduct, which is very clear about theft. I was more concerned that my computer might be roughly handled – I had just finished typing the first draft of a novel and hadn't had a chance to email it to myself. That was far more irreplaceable than money or the computer itself.

Along with ten days of silence, I looked forward to not using money. But before I could part with my wallet, I had to rent a pillowcase and sheets. I could have brought my own, I know, but travel makes some things less than perfect. The cost of renting them, added to the bus and train ride, left me with less cash than I thought I would have, and I hoped there'd be enough to get me back to Kyoto and use an ATM. Oh well, I would worry about that when I left in ten days.

I went next to the sleeping quarters, a large room shared with six other men. It was unclear if our period of silence had begun, but nobody seemed to be speaking. There was a monastic feel to the place. Everyone was austere. It was like an introvert convention. After settling my things and making

my bed, I went outside and checked out the restrooms. For the men's room there were two urinals, three toilets, three showers, and five sinks. I later learned that there were about 25 men at the retreat (and about 30 women), and there was never a long wait to use the restroom. Being winter, we had to pass through some cold to get between buildings, but nothing to whine about. In fact, I decided to wear only flip flops at the retreat to save socks from the laundry, keep my feet free of athlete's foot, and air them out.

The English speakers (men and women) next gathered in the men's dining hall to get our immediate questions answered. This was our last chance to converse and our last interaction with females before the course began. We met the staff who would be cooking for us and the teachers in training. People seemed excited to get started. A woman who had done the course three times told us that our legs would be experiencing major pain before long. I brushed this aside.

We prepared for dinner. My expectations were low. I'd heard tales of the food at these places: a tasteless gruel that left your stomach desperate for something substantial. I'd heard of people sneaking away at night to pick up candy bars. I was sure this wouldn't be me, that I was one of the austere ones (and didn't crave junk food anyway), but I was still nervous about the food. After traveling through Asia for three months, my health had deteriorated. I'd lost weight as I'd substituted food I loved for too much meat (especially seafood), not enough fruit and vegetables.

To my surprise, the food was just fine, better than I had any right to expect, and a nice change from travel food. It was simple and healthy. It was all vegetarian. We had a good variety of rice, noodles, and bread. Fruit could be had at most meals, and vegetables and mushrooms too. Tea was also available. I don't normally drink caffeine and was surprised to find it at a meditation retreat (I consider it disruptive for meditation), but I found myself drinking it out of a perverse desire to do something.

Our Noble Silence soon began and I saw the meditation hall for the first time, saw the main teacher – a middle-aged Japanese woman who spoke English and Japanese – and found the spot where I would spend 100 hours in the coming days. The room was tightly packed, quite a change from my usual practice of meditating alone. I also wasn't used to sitting cross-legged without back support. I'd always used a chair or couch when meditating before. But I'd signed up for the course and agreed to give it a "fair trial," throwing away my preconceptions of how meditation should be.

I can't remember if there was any instruction that first night. I don't think so. Our time in the meditation hall was to acquaint ourselves with the layout and receive further instruction on basic procedures for the next day. I was pleased with the temperature there as well. I'd expected a drafty stone castle to complete the monastic image in my head. The reality was more like a yoga studio, and quite warm.

Bedtime was 9:30 PM. We would be waking at 4 the next morning and it had been a long day of travel, so I had no problem going to bed that early. I had accidentally left my earplugs in the

backpack I'd given the staff, and it took a long time to go to sleep without them, but when sleep came, it was deep.

The next morning I overslept. A bell was supposedly rung to wake us, but I hadn't heard it. I scrambled out of bed and to the restrooms where the others were brushing teeth, urinating, showering, and otherwise preparing for our first meditation session. After getting cleaned up, I hurried to the meditation hall and found my seat. By 4:30 everyone had arrived, and the teacher soon followed.

At some point early on I became aware of rituals involved with this organization. Its leader, S.N. Goenka, has made a series of video and audio recordings to instruct students. Each day begins with silent meditation, but after an hour or so his voice breaks into the meditation hall and he begins to chant. And chant. And chant some more. His voice has a deep, frog-like texture, and listening to it for an hour each day is the BEST thing in the world (that was my sarcasm voice).

Who is this S.N. Goenka? Several days into the course he offered a brief autobiography in one of the videos. Born in Burma, he became a successful businessman. He was wealthy, but afflicted by horrible migraines, and sought a cure from doctors around the world. This led him to morphine and other temporary solutions. When a friend suggested to Goenka that he learn Vipassana to help the migraines, he went to a teacher of this technique out of desperation. The rest, as they say, is history. He transformed from skeptical student to reluctant teacher and brought the course to India, and then to countries around the world.

Goenka has a gentle, self-mocking humor that also allows him to mock other gurus (and allows him to be such a successful guru). He has a repetitive, liturgical style of speaking, and his favorite phrases and words were repeated hundreds of times through the course. "Work diligently, patiently." He seems to savor each word, and I'm told he is a poet. I have no wish to read his poems.

When he began to instruct us in meditation the first day, he asked us to put our attention on our breath. Aha, I thought – this is similar to other breathwork that I've done. However, that was not the case. Other breathing techniques have involved controlling the breath, however subtly. Goenka asked us *not* to control it, to simply observe it. If it is fast, let it be fast. If it is slow, let it be slow. But simply observe it. That's pretty much all we did the first day.

It sounds simple, but it was incredibly difficult. If you've never meditated then you may not realize how difficult it is to keep your attention on one thing. Instructors in many traditions say that we have a "monkey mind" that is always scurrying to concentrate on something new. Like the eye, the mind likes to keep moving. Even with many years of meditation behind me, the slight differences in this technique made it a challenge. Plus my legs started hurting. Perhaps I was at a disadvantage. I rarely sit cross-legged and should have considered this before attending. I should have stretched and prepared better.

I struggled a lot that first day. Everyone in the meditation hall was so still, so quiet, that I hesitated to adjust my legs. The pain became horrendous. We took breaks every hour or so, and I

really tried to make it to the breaks without moving. The pain became excruciating. You may think I'm being overdramatic. Believe me, I am not. I became so lightheaded from pain that I almost fainted. And to add insult to injury, when I opened my eyes everyone else looked like they were in a blissful nirvana.

Finally the bell rang and we went to breakfast. These bells grew to symbolize both freedom and imprisonment, waking us in the morning, herding us from building to building, ending our meditation sessions, and calling us back to the meditation hall. Here is the timetable for those ten days:

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 noon - 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 room; lights out

If it wasn't already clear, this retreat is really about meditation. If they could remove the breaks for meals and rest, I think they would.

You may have noticed there isn't a break for dinner. There's a "tea break" at 5 PM. In reality, new students are also given fruit. That's it. Be grateful for that small mercy – returning students only get tea!

Without a chance to speak, and with few other activities available besides meditation, a student is forced to either take the program seriously or go insane. I did a little of both that first day. I wanted to leave, to *escape*. The cult-y nature of the chanting (students repeated a chant with Goenka: "Sawdoo, sawdoo, sawdoo...") and the pain in my legs was too much. This just wasn't what I was looking for. I had to go. I had to.

But... where could I go? Before and after the retreat I was staying with friends in Japan. I had made no plans for accommodation those ten days, and Japan is expensive. I couldn't afford ten days at a hotel. Somehow, I would have to survive the retreat. Based on that first day, this would be a

long retreat. Unbelievably long. Insanely long. But there I was, and there I would stay. At least I was in a beautiful setting. The woods and the hills were really a great place for the retreat, The snow and rain gave it a peaceful atmosphere.

That evening we English speakers (four of us) met in the dining hall to watch a video. The Japanese meditators were in the main hall listening to the teacher give her discourse. Let them have it. We would get to hear the discourse straight from the horse's mouth, from the head honcho himself, S.N. Goenka. Thanks to the magic of video technology, it was like he was right there in the room with us.

Goenka initially comes off as a drab, humorless man, like an Indian version of Ben Stein. Don't let that fool you. Not only does he have a sense of humor, he's also a teacher who understands what a student is going through. He addressed all the pain and frustration I felt that day. He nailed it so perfectly that I thought he must be talking to me directly. He has clearly had many students and knows what to expect of them, what doubts are running through their minds. He examines these issues like a pro coach and demolishes them with an orator's skill that you have to admire. His humor comes on gently, and he inserts charming stories into his dialogue in a folksy way. His ideas stick. After hearing him talk on that first night's discourse, I felt silly for my laziness, my doubts, the ease with which I had admitted defeat. Me, give up? Never! I would march back into that meditation hall the next morning and get down to business! Pain in the legs? Bah! Let the pain come. I would toss it aside.

Sleep came easy that night. I didn't need earplugs. I could have slept through jackhammers. Sitting had exhausted me. Persevering had torn a hole in me. Tomorrow I would be better prepared.

The next morning I actually heard the wake-up gong, and got to the meditation hall in a timely manner. I sat down, adjusted my pillow, wrapped myself in my blanket, and began.

We practiced *Anapana* meditation those first three days. After following the breath, we moved our attention to the area of skin below the nostrils and above the lips. I learned to keep my attention there. Before you try this yourself, I should point out that this essay is not intended as meditation instruction. If you really want to learn these techniques, you should go to a course. This is just to give you a general idea of what to expect. For each augmentation and alteration of the practice, we would spend ten hours meditating with it and being examined by the teacher to ensure we understood it. You might be able to learn these techniques through a book, but I recommend a teacher.

We began *Vipassana* meditation on the fourth day. It involves moving attention down through the body – first in very small movements, and later in large sweeps –then bringing the attention up through the body, focusing on more and more subtle sensations, until subtle sensations may be felt anywhere on or inside the body.

On the last day we also learned a third type of meditation: *Metta*. This involves entering a state of love and compassion for all beings.

If my explanation of any of these meditations is incorrect... well, I don't claim to be an expert. I only want to give you an overview of what we covered in the course. Describing these meditations is like describing the parts of a television set – a very different experience from watching television, I'm sure you'll agree.

I had genuinely profound experiences with both Anapana and Vipassana meditation, times when the pain in my legs subsided and I could stare into it and laugh it off. This pain was addressed many times in the lectures, and incorporated into the meditation. Both ecstatic joy and the worst aches could be brushed aside as passing phenomena. *Everything* was a passing phenomenon. To comprehend this was the intellectual "understanding" of the course, but to experience it you have to meditate.

Despite these moments of clarity, I mostly struggled with the course. At the end of the second and fourth day I was especially inclined to leave. I seemed to struggle with the physicality of the meditation, the sitting, more than others. It doesn't really matter how I fared in comparison. It wasn't a competition. But because I readjusted my legs four or five times an hour, I thought I might be distracting others. By the end of the course I had gotten down to one or two leg adjustments per hour, so it definitely improves.

And then there were my thoughts. Ever shifting and with all the time in the world, I sifted through the strata of memory and imagination. Many thoughts were sexual. Most were future oriented. Plans. Book ideas. Music ideas. Songs I wanted to hear. Things to do. Women to do. And how I was wasting ten days doing NOTHING.

But I was there. I had agreed to give it a "fair trial," so I returned to the technique. I was angry at myself for burning my bridges and doing the course in Japan. Had I done it in Cambodia or Thailand as originally intended, I could have left and gone to a cheap hotel. But there I was. Moreover, there was an intense peer pressure to stay. Nobody else had caved, as far as I could tell. I would not be the only one to back down.

On the afternoon of the eighth day I developed a migraine. Migraines are what drove Goenka to this technique in the first place, but I wanted nothing but to lie down. In the meditation hall I rested my head on my arms as best I could, barely able to balance. At the break I went to my bed and lay down. The bell soon rang. Every time it called us back to meditation I paraphrased John Donne in my head: "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

But this time I would not trudge back. The bed and my pillow were all I wanted in the world. Damn the torpedoes, and damn this meditation center.

The manager came to my bedside. With his limited English he made it clear that absenting myself from the group sitting was *strongly* discouraged. Strongly. I somehow got out of bed and made it to the meditation hall. I propped myself up to finish that sitting, and it was hell.

At dinner I scraped food onto my plate and down my throat, then went back to bed, a good rest period before the evening video discourse. I had actually grown to anticipate these videos. This goes

to show you how much I had succumbed to the ritualistic, robotic nature of the teaching, Goenka, his incessant chants, and the lifestyle of the retreat. Goenka had pointed out that the discourses are not entertainment, but only meant to steer you right, but they were a welcome break to meditation. Thinking back on their lackluster cinematography and pacing, they'd be unwatchable outside of the retreat.

I stumbled into the discourse late, and left after a few minutes. The pain in my skull was unbearable. If I couldn't escape the retreat, then I would escape the waking world. I slept until the manager again roused me for the evening meditation, and I was tempted to lash out at him angrily, but I didn't – I couldn't. He and the other staff were always polite and friendly, and clearly cared about others, believing this technique to be *where it's at*. He was only managing, and I couldn't hold that against him.

Fortunately, the evening sitting was only 25 minutes. I made it through and then crashed.

That night I slept poorly, waking often. It is rare for me to wake up with a headache, but in the morning it was still there. I was surprised, blamed the pillow, which can best be described as a bag of rocks.

I talked with the manager and asked if I might access my backpack to get an ibuprofen. He checked with the teacher and then said that she wanted to speak with me. I didn't want to speak with her. I wanted my damned ibuprofen, and couldn't believe I had left it in the bag.

I went to the building where the teacher stayed, and met her for a private audience. I told her of my situation, my craving, clinging, and attachment to that little red pill. She said that taking medicine like that would interfere with the Vipassana technique. Instead of taking a pill, she gave me a new technique. I would lie in my room and follow my attention from my head down to the palms of my hands, keeping my awareness at my palms for five minutes, then moving it down to the soles of my feet, also staying there for five minutes. Then, instead of moving my attention up through my body (as we had learned with Vipassana), I would go directly to the top of my head and take my attention downward again.

I agreed to give this a try, grateful I could at least lie down. I cursed myself for even getting into this predicament. I should have just kept my ibuprofen with me.

I used the technique (and maybe fell asleep a little) while the other students did their 4:30 – 6:30 AM meditation. When the gong rang, signaling completion, I felt a little better and joined the students for breakfast, hardly ate a thing, then lay down some more till the 8 AM meditation.

Maybe the migraine had come about as the teacher said, as a deep seated disturbance brought out by Vipassana. I was just glad it was receding. It faded slowly till the afternoon, and by lunch my appetite was restored, and with it a clarity.

Where was I? What was I doing here? Was this my prison sentence? Had I joined a cult?

By the eighth day I had almost given up on the program completely. One of my biggest blocks was that I already had strong forms of meditation that resonate with me. I confess to using a generic

breathing meditation later in the course, a technique more reliable for getting me the "flow" feeling I associate with meditation. For me, meditation is about releasing the ego as much as anything else, and I found the Vipassana technique overcomplicated for this. I know that Goenka might say that getting past pain and into wonderful experiences is not what meditation is about, that pleasure and aversion to pain lead to craving, then clinging, and then attachment, and I agree with the basic tenets of this (and Buddhism). But I still didn't feel right with the technique.

I remembered I'd agreed to give the technique a "fair trial." I was there to practice Vipassana, not other techniques, and I returned to it for the remainder of the course. I would do my best to develop "equanimity" (a word used hundreds of times by Goenka).

Goenka says the technique is not a religion, and that it is only technique. Yet he cannot leave it at technique, and goes on to speak of reincarnation, of multiplying sankhara with every negative thought and act. He disparages concepts of heaven and hell in other religions, but then talks of attaining nirvana, reaching the "final goal," and avoiding dukkha.

Goenka begins his discourse by insisting that your other beliefs and lifestyle are not what matters, and that it's all about the practice and technique. Yet by course's end he makes it clear that if you really want to progress you'll have to do more, much more, than just meditate. The moral code intrudes strongly, and that's when I felt he had overstepped his bounds.

Naturally some people (like me) will not continue with the Vipassana technique as taught in the course. Some will incorporate it into their previous activities, "mixing" techniques in spite of Goenka's warnings. Others will use the technique twice a day as instructed and have no further connection with the program. Some will stick with it and perform service (as Goenka suggests), getting with the program. And some – and there will always be people who do this if you cast the net wide enough – will give themselves entirely to the program and its leader, doing whatever he and the program asks of them. Every religion, cult, and organization worth its salt is prepared to make use of these hardcore individuals, and Goenka is no exception. He may not have the unconscientious mind of a Jim Jones, but I don't really know anything about him. And even if he's as jolly and simple as he comes off, he will one day die and pass the mass of his organization along. It is not to blame him but to cite the festering quality of scale: any conscious system of organizing people (churches, corporations, schools, organizations) loses efficiency and contains glitches and blind spots in proportion to its size.

Students are strongly encouraged to serve and come back for future courses. Donations are encouraged on the videos by Goenka, who "as a former businessman" (one of his jokes) points out that unless you pay an appropriate amount, the technique will not work. Goenka is a powerful debater, and good at anticipating objections. On the sixth, seventh, and tenth days there were carefully crafted calls for donations in the evening discourses. This is done very well by Goenka, tying it to the moral code that comes with the system. Personally, I would have preferred morality and theory to be separate from the technique, but I understand the need to take advantage of the

retreat. After all, this is ten days of isolation from all other media. There are no critical voices from friends and family. There are few voices at all.

I don't mean to sound glib. I appreciate that the course is pay-what-you-will and that only people who have completed the course may make a donation. Once the video was off, I was not once pressured or even asked to make a donation. Our belongings were returned and there was a box on the table labeled "Donations." That's it.

Even within the group I'd expected more conformist thought (especially hearing the chants of "sawdoo, sawdoo, sawdoo" that I refused to take part in), until the Noble Silence was ended on the tenth day and I found that others had their own criticisms. Many had spiritual practices that conflicted with Vipassana. Pranayama, for instance, should be stopped if the practice of Vipassana is taken up, disturbing at least one practitioner at my course who enjoyed its benefits.

The Noble Silence itself seems like a good idea, but it's *not* truly silent. When Goenka and the instructor are the only voices you hear, their presence takes on a monolithic Big Brother feel. Anticipating this, I took only enough cash for transport to and from the retreat, promising myself I'd wait two weeks before making any kind of donation.

As it turned out, I didn't even have enough money to get back to Kyoto due to the expensive bus ride. Fortunately I had American money and was able to buy some yen off another Californian. Did I feel guilty leaving without paying a single penny? No. I was still conflicted about how much to pay, and wanted time to think about the retreat from a distance. Despite the image they pass off – using cassette tapes and emphasizing simplicity – I don't think the organization is hurting for money. There were posters at the retreat of the Global Vipassana Pagoda in India, a massive meditation center constructed at a cost of over \$16 million. I'm not here to criticize how they use their funds, but these posters removed any guilt I might have felt. Yes, I had eaten their food and slept in their bed, but did I want to support their mission? I needed time to think it over.

Why has this particular form of meditation spread so quickly? Is it, as Goenka indicates, that this is the true strain of Buddhism as taught by the Buddha? How do we know that to be the case? How do we know anything that comes down to us about the Buddha (and other historical figures) is accurate? A powerful sect or teacher will always claim their technique or belief is the best, and I think we owe it to ourselves to *not* believe them. I have senses and a critical mind so that I may try things myself.

I think the program's viral success is due to three factors:

1. Goenka's insistence that this is nondenominational or sectarian, and that it is meant for everyone.
2. The pay-what-you-will cost structure that brings in even the mildly curious, and allows more abundant students to contribute... abundantly.
3. The genuine benefits that can be obtained from Vipassana meditation, while being told this is THE BEST path. Since results are experienced, Goenka must be onto something.

It's the third part that disturbs me most – and you find this with most religions/cults: This is the *best* way, THE PATH – all other paths are inferior. Goenka basically says in one of the videos, "I have tried all the other ways, and this is the best meditation." And claiming that something is not a sect or religion, but *Truth*, is the oldest game in town. Other people have mythologies and bizarre practices, but you have Truth with a capital T.

I repeat that there were times when I found the course rewarding, but I would have found benefit using any form of meditation for 100 hours. True believers don't want to hear that. They want to know that this method is *the* method, that they've finally found *it*, that they've arrived. But I always hesitate to say any path is right for *everyone*. The universe thrives on diversity, and I don't foresee a time when everyone is doing any kind of meditation or spiritual practice. Moreover, there are much more accessible forms of meditation in existence. If this had been my first time meditating, would I bother to try meditation again? Probably not, which is unfortunate.

After all this criticism, I still think this Vipassana course might be right for you. Really! But I can't make that decision. No one can but you. It may be the exact form taught by the Buddha, or it may not. Can we know for sure? Does it matter? All we know is that someone taught it to us. All you can do is try it and see how it works within you. I have a personal prejudice against all organizations, viewing them as potentially malignant, so take my criticisms with a grain of salt. That's just me. I am not prepared to give two hours a day to this practice (as delineated by Goenka), or any more time and energy to this organization.

If this Vipassana course still interests you, here are some recommendations. Since this is an international organization, you may be tempted to do the course abroad. I don't suggest you do this. The course isn't a vacation, and if you need to leave it's better to be close to home. I also recommend you do it in a country where your first language is the majority. This simplifies things.

Definitely get in the practice of sitting cross-legged before you attend the course. You will not have back support, so learn to sit for at least one hour. Yoga, gymnastics, and stretching will surely help.

I also suggest you take very little money with you. I've heard of people coming out of the course so blissed out that they donate their life savings. Give yourself some room to evaluate the course from a distance.

The organization's website is **dhamma.org**. There may be other organizations teaching Vipassana, but I think this one is the largest.

On the last day of the course I remember looking at a children's book about Vipassana meditation. It showed kids at a shortened version of the course. Do they really have the patience for such an ordeal? I considered buying the book as a bizarre souvenir. Also available were complete recordings of Goenka's video lectures, and audio of his incessant singing. I had trouble seeing anyone paying money for this. I predict that Goenka has no future career as a singer, but you can let him follow you home if you choose. I chose to leave him at the course.