

Vipassana – 10 Days of Silence

In early March 2015 I renounced my modern life for 10 days. This is an account of my experience.

Rules

- No communication with fellow meditators (speech, eye contact, gestures, glances, writing)
- No phones, books, writing materials, communication devices, cameras or music
- No yoga, running, any other form of exercise (walking is permitted)
- Complete segregation between male and females
- No tight clothing or exposure of skin
- No dinner (2 x simple vegetarian meals per day)
- 12 hours of seated meditation per day (3 hours of meditation without changing posture)

Day 0

I arrived at the centre in the heart of the Blue Mountains excited but with an underlying sense of dread. I handed over my phone, notebook and all valuables and said goodbye to the outside world. For the next 10 days the only thing that would exist for me was the confines of this centre. No communication, no distractions – only my thoughts to keep me entertained.

As more people drifted in to registration, the hum of subdued chatter vibrated through the dining hall. I had little interest in getting to know my fellow meditators. This was a solo journey and I started to withdraw from small talk and social niceties.

There was an extensive run down of the many rules and regulations (most important – DON'T LEAVE!) and as we made our first journey to the meditation hall, the enforced silence begun. It felt strange but liberating to break my deep-rooted cultural obligations to acknowledge the people around me. Instead I scrupulously avoided any contact, keeping my eyes firmly fixed to the floor.

The first meditation session started with the guttural, tuneless chanting of S.N Goenka, a Vipassana meditation teacher who died in late 2013. The technique was very simple. I closed my eyes. Sat on the floor with my spine upright and began to observe the natural rhythm of breath. The outside world already seemed a long way away as that night I fell into my bunk bed, exhausted and slept immediately.

Day 1

When the gong sounded at 4am I was already awake and eager to get to the first sitting of the day.

The silence was beautiful. No pressure to communicate with anyone. No phone, no email, no jam-packed calendar – pure bliss! The mountain air smelled delicious. I didn't allow myself consider the endless ocean of time that loomed ahead of me. This focus allowed me to exist only in the present moment. Thoughts of the outside world did not permeate and I enjoyed genuine happiness as I sat and observed my breath.

On my first break I walked briskly around the bush tracks embracing the fresh, clean air and the stunning views.

Afternoon meditation sitting: I need to move! My body felt stagnant. Unaccustomed to sitting for any amount of time I felt this heaviness in the pit of my stomach, a pain in my right side and a general sluggishness.

The internal dialogue began: *"What is going on here? I need stimulation! Give me tasks."*

"I gave you a task – observe the breath, how simple can it get"

"BORING!!!! I want to move, plan my life, create emotions, have contact with others, eat ice cream."

It's so hot!! Must remove all these layers. Wait, no shoulders on show, no midriff, no upper leg. Frustration! Where can I do a headstand without getting found out??

Day 2/3

The dulcet tones of Goenka played out through the hall. "Continue to focus your attention on the triangular area from your upper lip to the nostrils. Feel the touch of the breath"

OK great – I'm down with that, but I've been doing this for 12 hours!! My back ached, pins and needles plagued my legs, all the open hips in the world are clearly no match for 12 hours of sitting cross-legged. Frustration, agitation, despair....why can't we move!!

During the cherished breaks we were allowed to leave the hall. Oblivious to others around me I would fling myself on the grass, surrounding myself with the calming influence of nature as I stretched my limbs – I felt like a spring coiled too tight. I needed movement!

Day 4

I became more sensitive to sounds. The coughing, throat clearing, farting, burping, rumbling and hiccupping in the hall started to grate on my fragile senses.

I sat, and waited, and observed my breath, observed the tiny triangle under my nose, searching for elusive sensation. Goenka continued to remind us from his grave "If you can't feel sensation it means your mind is not yet sharp enough to experience these subtleties. However don't get attached to sensation. Don't enjoy

sensation. Don't feel aversion towards blind spots or pain" AAAARRRRGGGHH!! I don't care anymore – get me out of here!

Wake. Meditate. Eat. Walk compulsively. Meditate. Walk. Eat. Meditate. Walk. Drink tea. Meditate. Sleep.

Day 4

A change! Vipassana day! What we had been practicing up until now was not Vipassana!! Now we were to move our attention around the whole body.

"Hey, this is more like it, you've given me something to do! But wait, I can't feel any sensation in the top of my head – maybe a crawling? Oh yeah I can visualise ants crawling....wait. no visualisation allowed. Only observe sensations AS THEY ARE! Don't get depressed if you can't feel any sensation. But if you can't feel any sensation your mind is not getting sharpened. So how should I not feel depressed??!! Wait there's a tingling on my forehead.... Its spreading down my face, there it is in my throat. This is the elusive flow of vibrations! Hallelujah I've finally purified my mind! Oops now I'm craving these vibrations. Now I've started a thought process. Oh no I've lost it again. My right shoulder won't tingle. Come on right shoulder!!! What is wrong with you.... Have I not given you enough attention in life...

Silent tears of frustration coursed down my cheeks. This was the edge of a storm that threatened to erupt noisily. Pure panic. I can't cry, I can't disturb everyone else... What if I'm the one person who ruins it for everyone else??!! Hey , there's that part of my that wants only to please others. What about me, if I want to cry, I'm going to cry. OK now I feel better. And focus, and YES there's that tingling in my right shoulder. I love you right shoulder, all is forgiven!

Outside I notice the colours are brighter. The luminous sky shines like silver. I lay under a tree, have a good cry and suddenly the world is a beautiful place. A mosquito lands on my arm – I rejoice in the contact, the connection. I let it bite me, watching as my blood fills its tiny body. I'm struck by the connection between all life. I hug a tree. I realise I haven't smiled in days. I tentatively turn the corners of my mouth up – my jaw creaks into life.

Day 5

Half way. Only 5 days left. Only 5 days??!! This has been the longest 5 days of my life. I start to miss Jimmy. I wonder how he's doing. How is the world coping without me? Have I forgotten how to teach yoga?

In seated meditation we are expected to sit for 3 x 1-hour meditations in 'strong determination'. This means not un-crossing legs or moving your arms for the full hour. The Buddhist Vipassana philosophy is that craving and aversion (hatred) are the roots of all human suffering. The idea is that by not reacting to unpleasant or pleasant sensations through the body you will begin to 'purify the mind' and find genuine happiness. I can accept this idea in theory, however it

soon becomes torturous when my left leg starts to ache and develop pins and needles a few minutes in. According to Goenka, any pain in the body indicates deep rooted impurities of the mind coming to the surface (!). I'm more inclined to believe pins and needles indicates prolonged pressure on my sensory nerve, reducing the blood flow but what would I know. My willpower is tested to the limit and I sit there without moving for the full hour. My determination and downright stubborn attitude means I will not relent, no matter how uncomfortable it gets – a sure sign of my mental state! Somehow I make it through the hour before hobbling out into the bright sunlight. The voice of reason whispers “this can't be good for you!” I tell it to shut-up and continue with my masochism.

That night the sky put on a spectacular show. I stood mesmerised along side my silent companions, watching the fiery ball make its descent through a pink and silver space-scape to the other end of the earth. I felt as if I'd never witnessed a sunset before that moment, everything seemed sharper without technology or commentary to distract my mind. The connection we shared without speaking was intensely powerful as I basked in this undiluted genuine bliss.

Day 6

OK this should be getting easier any time about now. All I have to do is sit this day out and it's plain sailing - I'll be levitating above this meditation hall! I won't feel any pain in my legs, hey I won't even have legs, I'll just be floating around in orange robes, hanging out in the clouds.

“Passing your awareness from the top of your head to the tips of your toes.... From the tips of your toes to the top of your head. Continue.” ARRRRGHH frustration strikes. It eats away at me. I make a pact with my agitated mind to give it all the stimulation it could possibly want, as soon we're out of here. I imagine this it what it's like engaging with a toddler on a long haul flight.

I'm too hot, cant remove this shawl, can't move my hands. If I move I'll break the tentative spell that's somehow keeping me from screaming, from running out of this hall, running to my car, driving fast as far away from here as possible.

Day 7

Depression. 3 days left. Only 36 hours of sitting in this hall. You've got to stop thinking like this – you'll drive yourself crazy! You've got your whole life to enjoy the outside world, make the most of this experience. Be here.

My mind has other ideas and is busy planning for the future, thinking about seeing the people I love, communicating, teaching, practicing yoga, having sex.... My heart can't take it. It beats so hard in my chest I imagine it erupting messily onto the cream blanket (appropriately labelled 'Old Aged Care').

Come on mind, we had a pact. All these things are unimportant. You know what's really fun? Focusing on the sensations in the body. Top of the head, back of the

head, forehead. Where are you elusive subtle sensations? OK, now I've lost my flow. Focus. OK top of the head....

Are they serious?? It's definitely been an hour. I half open one eye and one of the teachers is staring straight at me! I feel like a naughty teenager. Ring the bell already!

I continue to compulsively pace around the walking tracks. My mind is soothed. The bell rings and zombie-like we shuffle to the hall of doom to start again.

Day 8

A rebellion! My frantic exploring led me to a closed off area of bushland. I jumped over the small barricade and stealthily made my way along the overgrown track. Suddenly the intimidating male teacher walked past inches away from me. I rolled under the hedge and hid – I must have ended up in the forbidden teachers area. I waited for a few minutes before making a run for it – keeping my head down and sprinted back to safety. The excitement makes my head pound.

Sitting is definitely becoming easier. As the physical pain decreases I experience a profound sense of peace within this minimal lifestyle.

Day 9

My tongue feels like its swelling in my mouth. It has been lying dormant for too long and has become fat and lazy like a huge slug constricting my airways. I wonder how many people have died from suffocation during Vipassana from their overweight tongue. I need to Google! Oh wait. Google doesn't exist. All that exists are these sensations coursing through my body.

Day 10 – Noble Silence is Broken

Today is Metta (Loving Kindness Day). After our morning meditation we send out vibrations of peace, love and harmony to all beings and finally the moment arrives – Noble Silence is broken.

My voice sounded strange, a little squeaky, unsure. I was suddenly shy, giggling, stumbling over words. I'd been sharing my sleeping, eating and meditating space with a collection of women all ages, from all walks of life and I'd never seen them smile. Faces became animated and changed from sombre to smiling, the buzz of chatter instantly filled the air. I almost missed the silence.

I wasn't ready to share my experience. I didn't know how I felt. I know these 10 days were extremely challenging. I know I experienced profound moments of deep peace and genuine happiness and I'd certainly become more acquainted with the inner workings of my mind.

Since returning to Sydney I feel a deep sense of gratitude for my life and the people in it. I feel more balanced, tolerant and definitely more patient. I've made

peace with my mind and we've compromised – 30 minutes meditation morning and night. Life is sweet!

For more information visit <http://www.dhamma.org.au/>

For the Blackheath centre visit <http://www.bhumi.dhamma.org/>