

A silent voyage

Vipassana meditation is often considered as a means to end a particular problem. NISHA SAMSON tells us why Vipassana is not just that, but a way of life, an ongoing process of self-discovery.

"You are young, why are you doing this course now?", "Beta, are you facing any problem?", "Why would you even consider doing a Vipassana course?"

These were but a few questions I was asked when I registered for a Vipassana course in 2008. Vipassana is not just a momentary solution; it's a journey that begins with a 10-day course in the ashram, and one that continues in life through application.

A calling

Vipassana is one of India's most ancient forms of meditation, established by Gautam Buddha, some 2,500 years ago.

The term "Vipassana" is a Pali word and literally means to see things as they are.

While Vipassana spread across Indian borders during Buddha's time, sadly, this technique was lost to India. Satya Narayan Goenka (better known as S.N. Goenka) studied under U Ba Khin, a senior civil servant with the Burmese government. After 14 years of intense studying and practising, S.N. Goenka began to teach in India, in 1969.

While Vipassana meditation continues to grow, most people have questions regarding the 10-day vow of silence, two meals (breakfast and lunch) with a light snack of puffed rice and bananas in the evening, and a 4 am wake-up call, among other things. Some do the course in an effort to beat a physical ailment. Vipassana will help alleviate the pain, but one must understand that an overnight cure is far from forthcoming. Vipassana will, however, help you deal with your

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discomfort and help you overcome it, eventually.

Have I reached enlightenment? Far from it. But, I believe that I am a better person because of my learning and practice. Most of us join the course because of what it can do for us. However, after following the precepts and practising Vipassana, we reach a point where we wonder about what we can do for another human being. This is what Vipassana is all about, a self-realisation that life is not about the 'self' but about everyone around us.

The technique

This technique focuses on controlling your mind by simply observing the sensations in your body. Think about it—what do you do when you feel an itch on your arm? You scratch. Vipassana teaches one to do nothing but observe that itch—don't scratch, just observe—and in due time, you will notice that the itch has disappeared. This goes to prove that everything in this world is impermanent.

As we continue observing various sensations in our body, we may feel one sensation stronger than another. The stronger sensation is called the 'gross' sensation, and the sensitive one, 'subtle' sensation. When I started practising, I had my doubts; I wondered whether just

observing sensations would help me fortify my mind. However, during Goenkaji's recorded discourses in the evening, we learnt that our observation was in fact, helping us toward non-reaction, and it is this non-reaction that Vipassana aims to teach.

We react to 'aversion' and 'grasping'. If we dislike something and/or a situation, we react with aversion and disgust, whereas if we like something and/or a situation, we react with grasping. It is ingrained in our nature to try and escape uncomfortable occurrences, and to try and crave for favourable ones. Let's take an example: all of us like experiencing joy and feeling happy all the time. However, happiness, like everything else, is impermanent. When a happy situation passes, most of us will crave the past happiness, and try and escape a not-so-happy situation. It is human nature to behave like this.

Vipassana helps us understand that just like happiness, sadness, pain and all other emotions are a part of life, and to accept them all as temporary will help us lead fuller, more fulfilling lives.

The process of learning non-reaction begins there and continues in daily life, Vipassana is an inter-connection between the mind and body, it is recognising, accepting and in effect, seeing ourselves for whom we really are, thus allowing the technique to help us overcome our spiritual difficulties.

The journey

I went to the ashram with an open mind and returned with a wide one. Every individual has their own learning, and here's what I brought back. Simple observation helps us to view life and situations for what they really are, not what we perceive them to be. It is not so much about the situation, as much as it is about choosing how to deal with it. Vipassana helped me realise that my 'ego' is my greatest enemy. My ego and pride are partners in crime and they want us to believe that everything revolves around us.

After I completed my course, I was asked how it was and what my experiences were like. I didn't know how to answer

these questions because each one's Vipassana experience is unique to them. While each of us knows what is expected of us while at the ashram (the official website has a code of discipline, FAQ and anything you might want to know about Vipassana), we are unaware of how we will be able to deal with meditation, silence and everything that goes with it.

One person's experience should not be generalised, and one must refrain from measuring their own experiences against another's. None of our lives are identical, none of us act and/or react the same way, and hence, our experiences too, will be unique and exclusive.

No quick-fix, this

There are a lot of meditators who attend the course in the hope of having an ailment cured overnight. But, there really is no such thing as an overnight cure. Yes, Goenkaji overcame his physical ailment, but that happened with disciplined practice rooted in faith and belief.

On the final day of my recent course, I overheard a meditator complain that her backache was as bad as it was when she began. This is when each of us has to stop and ask ourselves why we're doing this course. Begin by being honest about your intentions. And yes, even if you are looking for a cure to an ailment, please know that the cure will be gradual.

Learning

Vipassana has many benefits, and these benefits will vary for each person and their situation in life. However, the common goal is equanimity, non-reaction, peace and calm, and rest assured that these attributes will come in time. This is a gradual transition, but slowly, you will notice a change in yourself, a change for the better. The rights and wrongs in life that we bother about, will seem unimportant. As Vipassana believes, "This too shall pass." 🙏

To know details of Vipassana, the ashrams in India and internationally, and more, visit www.dhamma.org

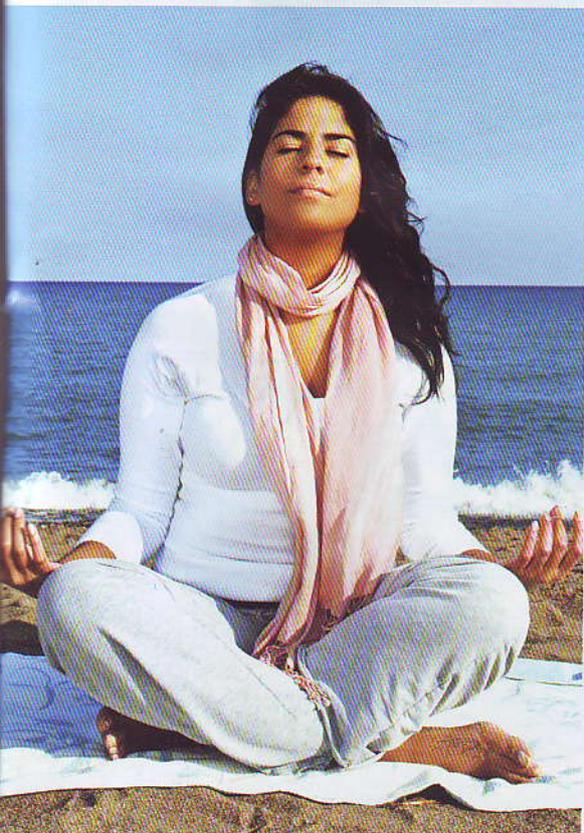


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