

10 days of silence

Meditation boot camp; is Vipassana for you?

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Summary

I recently became a first-time participant to a 12-day Vipassana meditation retreat near Onalaska, Washington at the [Northwest Vipassana Center](#), as taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. I first became aware of Vipassana and the center back in 1997, but found the schedule and set of restrictions daunting with the potential for 100+ hours of seated meditation over the course of the 10 days of silence. It is the only one of its kind in the northwest region. I went into the experience a fairly balanced and happy individual, albeit with small bouts of generalized anxiety that I would experience ever few weeks or so. Everyone has problems and tensions in their lives, and I feel that I am ahead of the curve of most and fortunate for that. I was not seeking to fix anything, but knew that I could stand to benefit on some level.

Benefit I did, and by day 4 when the technique was first introduced, I got more out of the experience than I possibly could have imagined. I was truly amazed with how simply quieting the mind and turning one's attention to the awareness of body sensations could somehow be so therapeutic. I immediately wanted to share with the world, as I strongly believed everyone needs to experience this. After a few long and intense days of meditation I made a number of breakthroughs around old and deeply rooted emotional and psychosomatic issues. I also spent many hours working with the old pain of a long-term relationship that ended some time ago. Past fear-based issues rooted in social anxiety from my childhood also came up at the end of the

retreat; difficult to witness and I was thankful to learn tools to do so objectively. Overall, I quickly came to realize and experience firsthand how old wounds can grow and fester, manifesting in daily life in subtle ways.

After returning a week later I still feel a calmness I've never felt, no longer as subtly irritated by everyday problems and with a renewed level of focus that I look forward to maintaining through regular meditation practice. I am a creative and dynamic thinker and sometimes find it difficult to stay on task, and I am already astounded on my increased productivity due to my improved level of focus. I continue to feel and see the impact this retreat has had on me, as I was awoken by the habitual patterns that once had ensnared me.

I feel very fortunate that Goenka started this movement and provides the teachings free of charge. While this may turn out to be a short-sighted claim, I feel I will be forever changed for the better good because of it. This is not to say that I don't realize how easy it is to get caught back up with my old patterns and lose the bulk of said benefit. There is more work to be done, and I plan to stay on task. The benefit is too great.

Despite the amazing amount of progress I made in the course of 10 days, I am not a complete advocate of Goenka's retreat or teaching style. There are a number of shortcomings and dangers in its application that I believe limit its potential or its goals in helping others. My primary concern is that the retreat had been advertised as being non-sectarian, and its brochures made mention of learning the technique that Buddha used to reach enlightenment. There are public, well-written critiques of Goenka teachings that I recommend reading before taking the plunge, this [one](#) in particular I found to be quite accurate in expressing my concerns, which I'll touch on throughout the article.

What is Vipassana?

History and theory

Vipassana is one of India's most ancient meditation techniques. Vipassana is a word in Pali which translates literally to insight or seeing within. It is described in the center's brochure as the process of mental purification through self observation and introspection. Gautama Buddha rediscovered this lost tradition 2,500 years ago and utilized the technique to become enlightened. In my exposure to the retreat I came to realize that Buddha's discovery was revolutionary to the inner workings of the human mind. Through direct experience one can have psychological insight simply not possible in the superficial or in every day conscious thought. The power or liberation comes from experiencing our past objectively and without reaction with an opportunity to re-program our unconscious.

S.N. Goenka is widely known as one of the foremost non-sectarian teachers, and it is important to note his 10 day course focuses on what many in the meditation world consider a highly selective form of Vipassana. Vipassana is also known as "mindfulness meditation" where one looks within, utilizing all the senses. Goenka's version focuses specifically on awareness of body sensations and his technique is arguably for simplicity, but this is not explained in the course. Upon further research I found that his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, was documented in 1961 as saying that once awareness of body sensations is practiced, one may move on to the other senses.

Goenka's Teaching

There is much debate over Goenka's technique, with many comparisons to that of the original Buddha. Gautama was known for having many meditation themes, changing style of technique depending on the type of person and specific goals of the student.

What is not argued is the major themes or shared goals of liberation, and as such, I will stay focused on Goenka's technique in the following paragraphs. I find it important to mention this, as the teachings at the retreat were very narrow and made broad claims of how we were learning the same technique as Buddha taught, which is sadly false. With that said, I gained much respect for this version of the technique and can say it worked very well for me.

At the retreat, assistant teachers are present to help answer questions at the end of each day after they "push play" on Goenka's pre-recorded video and audio instructions. The version in rotation was created in 1991, and heard and watched at over 200 centers worldwide which Goenka insists upon to maintain consistency of the teaching. To give an idea of the scale of Goenka's movement is the recently constructed and simply breathtaking [Global Vipassana Pagoda](#) that can seat 8,000 people at a time.

There is a code of discipline or ethics (Silas) which are foundation to the practice and specifically for Samadhi, or the concentration of mind. They are universal to most world religions and meditation practices. One is not to kill, steal or lie, and abstain from intoxicants and sensual pleasures. After I sent my application in, I was asked by the teacher over the phone during interview process to not drink leading up to the retreat which was still a month away.

The ethics are easy enough to follow if not an addict, next comes preparing of the mind. Awareness is developed during the first few days of the retreat through the observation of one's natural breath, using a widely practiced breathing technique in all meditation styles called anapana. This technique alone has huge impact on your daily life, with decreased stress, improved focus, and a range of other benefits. After a couple solid days of

anapana the mind slows down and mental chatter subsides enough allowing for Vipassana technique to be effective. This was very similar to what I have practiced in years past when doing meditation.

Vipassana is introduced in the middle of Day 4. Assistant teachers question each student directly to determine level of awareness reached, and give helpful tips to practice before attempting the technique. In order to proceed you need to feel some kind of sensation in the small area of skin above your upper lip, and below your nostrils. The mind should be sharp enough to feel the softest breath, a tingling sensation, or even the room's temperature. The instructions are much more in depth with many points of reference. After you achieve this focus, you move your attention to the top of your head and asked to feel sensation there, and you continue to do this as you move down the body. This is more challenging than it sounds, as you quickly realize that certain parts of the body are easier to sense sensations than others.

Vipassana psychology (in simplified terms) breaks the mind into 4 parts, which I found helpful to understanding the breakdown of the technique. *Cognition* or acknowledgement of the sense objects, *Recognition* or discrimination of the type of sense, *Sensation* or the experience thereof, and the mind's *Response (sankara)*, which is the sub or unconscious response to the actual sensation. The crux of what Buddha learned was that the mind does not crave the actual sense objects, but the resulting sensations. The technique allows one to retrain the associations of these sensations. In order to be successful, one must practice equal parts awareness and equanimity as you experience the sankara.

Goenka promises that the technique has the potential to effectively eliminate the root cause(s) of all unhappiness: craving,

aversion, and ignorance. The sensations felt on the body represent the cravings (greed, pleasure, etc.) and aversion (hate, fear, etc.) and as these sensations come into the moment, you are to observe without further craving or aversion, and these responses to old memories will slowly diminish. I witnessed this first-hand.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence which show significant success in improving one's well being and other measured life improvements through the use of Vipassana and other mindfulness meditation practices. There are very interesting research reports by [VRI](#) that measure impact of Vipassana in daily life, including one with 600 [government](#) administration workers. In this particularly research study, 97% of government officials who attended the 12 day course said it should be incorporated into their HR programs.

"There cannot be peace in the world when people have anger and hatred in their hearts. Only with love and compassion in the heart is world peace attainable." S.N. Goenka
at UN Millenium World Peace Summit 2000

My Background

Brief history and why I decided to go

I performed a fair amount of research before making the decision to apply. I read through a few different online critiques regarding the technique and made sure to do any number of things to limit the number of variables that might provide false truths of my overall success. For example, simply isolating one self and having a proper diet will make one feel better after 12 days.

Perhaps some part of my story or experience will resonate with you and give perspective in how I came to the determinations of this article. I first heard of Vipassana meditation in my early 20s while studying eastern philosophy and world religion. The knowledge that Buddha himself used a version of it in his path for liberation made it particularly attractive. During my studies I had been exposed to a few differing meditation styles including Zen, Transcendental and other mindfulness techniques. I made only meager attempts to practice meditation, but never for any period more than 1 hour, more than one sitting a day, or for more than a few days at a time. At that age, I lacked the patience or discipline to sit for hours on end and the promised rewards did not seem relevant at that age.

Over the course of the year and by the end of 2009, I slowly improved the level of discipline in my life, and on some level going to this center was one element of proving that to self. On the mental health side of things, as a past sufferer of panic attacks and more recent residual generalized anxiety, this made for an interesting test of how they might manifest in practice. I had read of others having success with Vipassana for any number of mental and general health issues such as PTSD, anxiety related disorders, substance abuse, and stress. I was not a real sufferer of any of these, but I knew I had things to work through. At the time, I was more attracted to the discipline of sitting in silence for 10 days then looking for any kind of cure. I had not reached a point where I was desperate for answers, or had I ever sought any kind of real professional help or been on any medication. This is not to say that these problems in the past had not weighed me down over the years and made life difficult from time to time.

While unemployed I had also been taking the time to put effort investing into my overall mental health and physical well being so that I could be as effective as possible once re-entering the

marketplace. In the previous months I had changed up my diet and had performed an elimination styled diet for some time, which helped me isolate some gluten and other intolerances that were causing problems with mental clarity. I had also consulted with one of the practitioners at [Kerala Spa](#) in Wallingford. This created a solid baseline for the retreat, I thought.

The Experience

As noted in the summary, the retreat was life changing. I was extremely surprised with the results after such a short period of time. On the last day we were allowed to talk with one another, and I discussed shared experience with several others. I found that my experience was unique, as most did not have the same level of extreme revelation.

The daily schedule:

4:00 a.m.	Morning wake-up bell
4:30 . 6:30 a.m.	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30 . 8:00 a.m.	Breakfast break
8:00 . 9:00 a.m.	Group meditation in the hall
9:00 . 11:00 a.m.	Meditate in the hall or in your room
11:00.12 noon	Lunch break
12:00.1:00 p.m.	Rest, and interviews with the teacher
1:00 . 2:30 p.m.	Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30 . 3:30 p.m.	Group meditation in the hall
3:30 . 5:00 p.m.	Meditate in the hall or in your room
5:00 . 6:00 p.m.	Tea break
6:00 . 7:00 p.m.	Group meditation in the hall
7:00 . 8:15 p.m.	Teacher's discourse in the hall
8:15 . 9:00 p.m.	Group meditation in the hall
9:00 . 9:30 p.m.	Question time in the hall
9:30 p.m.	Retire to your room; lights out

Except in a few instances, you never actually sit more than an hour at a time with 5-10 minute breaks between. I felt the rest periods were more than adequate. There are actually only 3 required sittings in the meditation hall, you have the option to stay in the hall or practice privately in your room where they entrust you to use your time wisely. They remind you that to emphasize success, you should practice continuously. I think it would be a wasted opportunity to only do 3 hours a day, but it was nice that this is all you are essentially forced to actually do and took a lot of pressure off.

On the second day I meditated for 9 hours, the rest between 6-8 depending on my mental fatigue and how much I was able to sleep the night before. Despite the external pressures to practice continuously I felt no guilt when falling short of that. I found this amount of dedication to be perfectly adequate and successful in the end and ended up exceeding any expectations I might have had. I spent every opportunity to meditate in my room, as I wanted to be successful and disciplined in continuing to practice at home once the retreat was over.

The program and organization itself is mostly on auto-pilot with two assistant teachers (male and female) to assist same-sex with questions on technique at end of each day. The rest of organization comprises of an all volunteer board of trustees and old students coming back to be servers and help run basic operations.

What I found particularly fascinating is that all centers follow the exact same schedule and play the same recorded audio instructions and video discourses during their 10 day program to maintain consistency in the teachings which I was thankful for. Goenka is a charismatic and dare I say motivational speaker. His nightly discourses reminded me of India's version of the Landmark group which isn't necessarily a bad thing. I was

somewhat skeptical going into things, as the very nature of the environment leaves the students' minds in very pliable states.

While there were strong claims of non-sectarianism, and how scientific the technique is, most of the discourse is based around Buddhist tradition, mixed with jokes and anecdotes tinted with the lens of traditional beliefs. In particular, expect to hear mentions of sentient beings in other planes, and information pertaining to how we can't escape the poor decisions of our past lives.

I also was uncomfortable at times with Goenka's frequent jabs at certain religion's rites and rituals, which was completely unnecessary. I would say at least 30% of the discourse material had little to no relevance to the technique and should have been edited out. He frequently reminds everyone to not follow what he says in blind faith, but how can one not when he rarely substantiated the more challenging of his claims? I have since found teachers I better resonate with in various online forums which I will reference in a separate article or you can follow up with me online.

I have bulleted the highlights of the more intense periods of my experience. I was fascinated with how it seemed as though the most difficult periods of my life came to the surface first. I think your mind naturally wishes to purge itself of experiences that are weighing you down the most, but has no real avenue to do so with the distractions of your daily life.

- Day 1: Comprised mostly of establishing discipline in sitting for long periods without moving, and following one's breath to quiet the mind and raise one's awareness of bodily sensations (anapana). By the third day you were to focus on the area directly underneath one's nostrils, and above the upper lip and sense on your skin the slightest breath. I spent all day doing this with full determination,

wanting to be prepared for when we did the most work. It's important to note that getting over the pain of sitting was the easiest thing about this course.

- Days 2 & 3: After two long days of meditation, approximately 9 hours of seated meditation each, I retired to my quarters to be faced with nightmarish hallucinations on the walls of my room. For the first time in my life I understood where the classic images of hell are inspired from. Luckily, I felt no fear and watched objectively, fascinated with the level of detail and how I could possibly have so much darkness locked up inside.
- Day 4: Panic Attack. Goenka walked us all through the technique, starting with the top of the head and we slowly shifted our awareness down our bodies, "part by part, piece by piece." From the start I could feel a second skin hardening around me as my attention was brought to each new area. I couldn't help but be immediately in awe as the subtle tingling sensations transformed into those that were extremely stiff and rock hard. I immediately had an image of Han Solo and thought this is what he would of felt while becoming carbonized as trophy to Jabba. Despite being 3rd person observer, it was still a bit frightening as I felt completely locked into position while a pulsing sensation followed my attention; perhaps the very electrical impulses of my mind. My head began to pound, and as I reached my throat it became more difficult to breathe, yet I pushed on. It was by the time I reached my chest that my entire body shook, and my breath began to stutter as all my muscles tightened. It reminded me of watching the priest in the movies who is performing an exorcism as the body of the victim jolts. I knew at that point that I needed to cut the line soon, but that I had found

my cure. I became immediately aware that this technique had effectively brought up from my subconscious the memory of one of my worst panic attacks ever. I started to laugh and cry at the same time, wanting to run out of the hall to scream eureka at the top of my lungs. I couldn't believe what I was experiencing, and wanted to share with the world at this point the power of this technique. This was the start of my re-programming.

- Day 5: I managed to experience full body dissolution after a lot of hard work and countless hours activating every possible spot on my body. I experienced what is known to people at the retreat as "free flow" on multiple sweeps in several sessions over the next couple days. In one particular sitting I experienced something that I can only explain as my entire body filling with light and felt what I believed to be the true nature of impermanence. Afterward, as I walked through the field back to my room I felt an extreme lightness of body and I felt very high on life and full of happiness. I believe I became very distracted at this point wanting to leave and begin a new quest. Everyone else had still been sitting and trying to experience something which came in the form of questions around what they should be feeling at questions at end of night.

- Day 6-7: Meditation became more difficult. I believe I went deeper into my unconscious and now I was faced with a lot of blind spots, which is the inability to feel sensations in certain areas of the body, theoretically the mind preventing you from experiencing something very painful or difficult to deal with. The darkness similar to what I experienced from the first couple nights in my room returned in meditation as I started to become aware of

sensations in these blind areas. The sangkara (or transformed sensations) were very painful, and I had mild hallucinations and a general feeling of anger arose. The hallucinations came in the form of my chest being enclosed in a cage of twisted metal or rock. I worked with this for several one hour meditations over the course of these two days and felt things slowly ease over time. After this work, I could immediately feel the benefits, as things around me started to bother me less on subtle levels, for example when dealing with the tight quarters of the cafeteria.

- Day 8-10: In what I could assume and sense to be an old fear arises in the form of blind areas throughout my chest and back, neck, and spine with gross sensations in my hands and the inability to feel any underlying sensations in the left side of my body. I asked the teacher, "Why the left side?" He responded, "That is just how the sangkara is manifesting. It is as it is." This was the most difficult work yet, and when an area would start to become visible to me, my body would start to shake violently at its core and my mind would retreat. I did this over, and over and over again. At the end of the day, I would go back to my room and my body would be shaking all over with internal tremors. It made it close to impossible to fall sleep. It made me realize that the internal tremors I've faced over the years were not some pre-Parkinson or Multiple Sclerosis type condition, but my mind trying to release this old fear. My biggest breakthrough. This is not to say that some fear was starting to form with the experiencing of these tremors that I was causing more harm than good with this meditation.

The practice reminds you repeatedly to face everything (pleasure and pain) with equanimity, not to crave or avoid specific sensations or experiences, but this requires more patience than one can imagine. The level of concentration required was particularly draining for me, and I felt I spent quite a bit of time just trying new methods of concentration that were less draining. I would be interested in hearing others' feedback or advice with this. It is difficult to know if one is practicing correctly or not, as the mind's attention shifts in subtle ways that are not easily discernable.

One woman who had been here before said she got nothing out of the experience this time, and almost wished she hadn't come by day 8. She attributed this mostly to her frustrations around maintaining a level of focus, and feeling sensations in certain parts of her body being particularly challenging. This was a common thread, and is particularly telling about the downfalls of this technique as there are obvious "goals" in the teachings that can only lead to disappointment, no matter how much reassurance one receives. You are reminded that in the nature of life, all things are impermanent and in constant change.

There are specific milestones where new techniques in observation are introduced which require specific sensations to be felt. For example, as referenced above Goenka talks of the situation of where one feels subtle vibrations throughout the body, and that you may perform a 'free flow.' In this state, your mind can easily pass over your entire body in a single sweep, which provides a satisfying rush of sensation. It is all the more satisfying as most everyone I talked to spent endless hours sitting with "blind spots," or areas where no sensation is felt, awaiting patiently and persistently for this aforementioned change. Upon asking the assistant teacher what the longest period he's dealt

with a particular sangkara, he responded with a smile, “Oh, about 12 years.” That wasn’t very reassuring.

Final Thoughts

While extremely rewarding in the end, I found the experience to be one of the most difficult and challenging in my life. I doubt I will return to the center again unless it’s to serve, which you can read about on their website. I’d rather practice on my own or find other retreats that have a similar schedule which I heard exist, and without Goenka’s chanting or end of day discourse which I would find to be a waste of time as a returning student. It is not optional. Though, I would make exception to visit The Global Pagoda to experience meditation in the setting of thousands of others.

I would not recommend this program if you have any kind of emotional instability and would seriously question attending unless you were comfortable re-living past disturbances and facing them on your own. The environment felt very safe and supportive in a hands-off kind of way. However, there is no trained staff, and I would go into this as if you were working in isolation. I did find personal reports online of people being hospitalized, reliving forgotten child abuses and an example of someone bi-polar disorder spiraling out of control on the 10th day. That is the power of this technique, and the fact that there is no real support system present made me question some of the dangers associated, even for myself.

I have since found countless online resources for psychotherapists who specialize in Vipassana and related therapies (EMDR, MBSR, DBT, Wave, Etc) to give extra support when dealing with difficult issues without having to be in a boot camp environment. Feel free to contact me if you have trouble finding these. There was a fairly thorough application process that

I recommend answering as openly and honestly as possible. I even received a personal call from the teacher for the course warning me of the dangers based on my previous anxiety related issues. He told me it was likely that they would likely re-surface and that I would have to face them. He was right.