

A Sit in the Woods

by Vincent Rupp

Introductory Note

This story is based completely on my own experience in a ten-day Vipassana course in August 2009. Taking notes was not allowed during the course, so I can't guarantee everything happened exactly as I remember, but I've checked facts where possible. There are places I've taken minor liberties with the teachings, such as condensing a series of examples into one or adding my own interpretation of an idea, but this was always for the sake of clarification; in no case have I altered an idea to suit my beliefs. Similarly, the other characters are based on real people, but my descriptions of them should not be regarded as completely accurate.

The ideas expressed in the course are not my ideas, nor do they have to be your ideas. Reading about them can be an interesting intellectual exercise, but the experience of the course was a thousand times more revealing than a few pages of reading could ever communicate.

For more information, please visit dhamma.org; the Wikipedia entry on the subject is not comprehensive or entirely representative of this style of course.

Chapter 1

Day 2 was the worst. At 3 PM, I was lying in my tent, thoroughly miserable, trying to decide whether to pack up right then and leave, which meant everyone would see me and the staff would probably try to stop me from leaving, or I could wait around for a few hours and then bolt in the night. My car was by the house, but I thought I could leave quietly; I hadn't checked my keys or phone in on Day 0.

Neither of these options was ideal. I wanted to leave immediately without any distraction or disrupting anyone else. Everyone else was probably doing better, but it just wasn't working for me.

All Day 1, I'd tried to concentrate on my breath, inhaling and exhaling naturally, but my attention kept wandering. Goenka had reassured us that was normal and we mustn't become dejected, depressed, or distraught. My mind went to a TV show I'd watched recently, but I brought my attention back to my breath for mere seconds only to find myself thinking of a Star Wars video game and then a conversation I'd had weeks ago. I noticed the wandering again, and focused with more determination on simply minding my breath. A few seconds later, I drifted away into a scene from a novel I'd not yet written.

For ten hours on Day 1, or maybe eight if I'm honest about how much time I really spent meditating and how much I spent resting and taking breaks, I resisted frustration and calmly kept trying. And it hurt. My back was sore from sitting up without a chair, my thighs and knees hurt even though I shifted position as often as I liked, and my butt, with only an inch-thick foam pad over the wooden floor, hurt every time I sat.

That night, Goenka had said the pain was normal and Day 1 was always hard. Don't become upset, he said, that's part of the process. It's a very deep surgical operation of the mind, he said, and this discomfort was a symptom of that.

This morning, in group meditation, he said we should be able to focus on our breaths, without our minds wandering, "for at least about a minute." I could do that, but only if I replaced "about" with "half" and "at least" with "at most". He repeated this a couple more times throughout the day. For someone who stressed the importance of remaining calm, he seemed deliberately trying to discourage me.

He'd already labeled anyone who left the course as "weak-minded." Well, I admitted, even if that was true, it wasn't very helpful. Maybe weak-minded people need more help than others, not reminders of their shortcomings.

Eight days left. The thought sank my heart and filled me with an overwhelming desire to get away. But I really had no reason to get home, and I knew that if I left, I wouldn't make excuses about coming back another time; I'd never come back. That thought made me feel worse, like screaming and kicking things, but I had to remain silent and undistruptive. I wanted something to work, to help me find peace with the world, but this wasn't doing it. There was no point to staying for eight more days of constant reminders of my inadequacy.

My mind wandered even when I wasn't meditating. Now, it wandered to thoughts of its own wandering. I've never been good at sitting still; I can't even sit through a half-hour TV show without fidgeting. It's compulsive, just how my brain works. Well, I figured, it's no wonder I'm so far behind here.

Day 1 had been bad; I wanted to leave then too. During the discourse, Goenka, or rather the video of him we watched, told me that was normal, everyone has some

emotional and physical pain when starting the course. Somehow, that made me feel better about Day 1. I assumed it would get better, but Day 2 was far worse. I decided it'd be better to bolt in the night, so I'd stay to see if he said anything that made me feel better about this awful day.

After a while, I went back to the yurt we called a meditation hall to try again. "Start again", Goenka always said, "Start with a calm and quiet mind." Right. If my mind had ever been calm and quiet, I wouldn't be here. Later, he'd call the course "Kindergarten" for the discipline. Unfortunately, there was no pre-school I could have attended first.

I looked at my watch often. Ten minutes here, five minutes there, and the time did eventually pass and it was tea time before long. But whenever time passed, it was only a countdown until I was back there. It would be evening group session again in under an hour. I drank some black tea and hoped the caffeine would help me focus. Of course it did not - minor chemical stimulation can't override the deepest parts of the habitual mind. Maybe if they'd served adderall.

The evening session passed the same way - with my trying to watch my breathing in between bouts of cursing Goenka for telling me to be calm when lack of such was why I'd come in the first place. I really wanted him to shut up, and then I'd tell myself to shut up and keep trying since he was a tape and unlikely to respond even to shouted commands of silence.

After the break, his video talked for an hour about shila and samadhi. Shila is morality, which can be subdivided into components such as the right thoughts, right actions, right livelihood, and each of those subdivided further. Wrong actions, Goenka explained, derive from wrong thoughts: we kill because we have anger, we steal because we have greed, and so on. Not everything is so simple, of course, but he was only giving examples to illustrate a point, not making the point through example. He'd talk almost every night about this mind-body connection.

Samadhi is generally translated as mastery of the mind. We all have strong impulses such as anger or lust and simpler things like desire for food. Without samadhi, we may scream at others when we are angry and overeat because eating is pleasurable, even when we understand rationally that these things harm ourselves or others. Only through mastering our minds can we have right thoughts and no wrong actions.

I couldn't control my mind for one minute; mastery seemed about as remote as unlocking a bank safe by systematically trying every combination.

Goenka didn't make me feel any better about my Day 2 experience, but after the discourse I was tired. Tired from waking up at 4 AM, tired of meditating, and tired of being upset. I wanted to crawl into my sleeping bag and just sleep. After thirty more minutes of failing to focus, that's exactly what I did.

Chapter 2

Vipassana is a form of meditation that was taught in India by Siddharta Gautama over 2,500 years ago. As with anything from so long ago, the historic record is subject to debate, but the story told in the course goes that he was a wealthy prince who abandoned his royal life to seek truth through a life of asceticism.

By the age of 35, he'd studied with all the greatest masters of his time but was unsatisfied with their teachings. He plopped himself down in front of a Bodhi tree and

resolved not to move until he had achieved total enlightenment. Goenka seemed to imply this took about a day, but some figures put the time at 49 days. Let's hope he was allowed bathroom breaks.

When he had realized the truth of all things, he left the tree and went to town where everyone who saw him immediately recognized that he was an enlightened person. Hence, he was known as Gautama Buddha. The word "Buddha" means something like "awakened one". To speak of "the Buddha" is to speak of an embodiment of enlightenment, not any specific individual.

Gautama spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching the dhamma (dharma, in Sanskrit¹) to the people so that they might also overcome the cycle of suffering and find peace and happiness in life. Even moments from death, he started explaining the dhamma to someone who wanted to learn from him.

This course's group wasn't composed of princes and ascetics. We were, without exception, completely normal-looking people. And we'd all come for different reasons. Sometimes it was a specific event: one woman had moved for a business that collapsed with the economy, one man's parents were divorcing. Some people thought it'd be a cool thing to do, part of a compendium of adventures in fasting or minimalist living. Other people wanted the benefits.

The benefits are easy to learn about; just ask anyone who's completed the course. It's common to hear "I felt such a sense of peace and compassion for all living beings." That sounds like it feels pretty good.

I hadn't come to the course with such lofty expectations. I was pretty calm most of the time. If someone insulted me, I didn't respond in kind or become upset myself. If my flight was delayed for an hour, I thought "Only an hour! What luck!" But there was still a part of my mind, buried very deeply, that occasionally exploded into strong negative emotions that would flare and simmer for hours. I could work on being more patient at the post office or flexible to unexpected and unwelcome reversals of fortune, but this deeper part only seemed to get smaller and harder; it wasn't going away.

When I woke up on Day 3, I told myself "Only seven more days!" with mixed emotion while walking to the bathroom. It was 4:35 AM. I felt pretty good about myself for that. On Day 1, I hadn't heard my watch alarm and I don't think anyone sounded the wake up gong, so I didn't wake up until after 5:30. On Day 2, I'd struggled through sticky webs of sleepiness until 4:45. So today, I was already doing better.

The past two days, I'd been trying to meditate in my tent, but it was too easy to lie down and take a break. Goenka said we could lie down and rest for five minutes at most. I'd been stretching that to ten or fifteen minutes. I'd tried meditating while lying down. It seemed about the same, until I woke up half an hour later. An hour of "meditation" in my tent would be 25 minutes of trying to focus on my breath and the remainder resting.

So today, I was going to the yurt for a while. That'd be more productive. Mornings were proving cold here in the mountains. I needed a t-shirt, a heavy shirt, a down vest, a rain coat, sleep pants, sweat pants, cotton socks, wool socks, a fleece balaclava, and down booties. But the yurt, somehow, was slightly warmer than the outdoors,² so it wasn't too bad.

¹The Sanskrit words are more common, but Vipassana uses the Pali language.

²I would find out later that the staff ran the space heaters in the yurt from about 10 PM until 4 AM.

Over the whole course, I'd enjoy these early morning sessions the most. There were only a few people in the yurt, and my mind wasn't prone to being upset about a day's failure to meditate yet. Plus, it was only two hours until break, not three or four like the later periods.

I wasn't focusing on my breath today, not exactly. Each night, Goenka gave slightly different instructions. Today, I was being aware of sensations in my breath area.³ There was a lot of it - a slight tickle here or an itch that slowly progressed across two millimeters of skin. I wasn't to respond to these sensations, only observe them.

When I focused on feeling what an itch felt like, I had much less desire to scratch it. "Let's see how long this lasts" Goenka had said. He was right; no matter how bad, it stopped itching eventually. In the meantime, it was just something to experience, not something to react to, though when my mind drifted, I'd catch myself with my hand halfway raised to scratch.

Around 5:30, I stood up quietly and left the yurt quietly. The sun still wasn't up, of course, but there was enough light to find the trail to the meadow with my tent without a flashlight. I went back to my cold tent and wrapped my sleeping bag around me to meditate there. Naturally, I spent more time lying down than I probably should have.

Breakfast was at 6:30. We had been told during the orientation to be prompt to meals so the volunteers would have enough time to clean up and have time to themselves, so I was walking up the hill to the picnic tables right on time. Gimli was just ahead of me, but no one else came along until a few minutes later.

I'd arrived at the site around 5 PM on Day 0 and had chatted with a couple other people. There were eight men and an unknown number of women. Sadly, the Equal Rights Amendment has never come to Vipassana, and separate but equal facilities are maintained for men and women. We shared the meditation hall, but looking at others was forbidden.

So I'd only heard a couple people's names, which forced me to create names for the others. One person was a stocky but trim man with a long beard and a swarthy complexion. Naturally, I called him Gimli.⁴

The other people whose names I never learned were Vagabond (from his appearance), Skinhead (from being very white and having a shaved head), Bulldog (from looking the part), and Steak Dinner.

Breakfast was always a wonderful affair. Bundled up in the cold, sipping tea while eating buttered toast and oatmeal and waiting for the sun to peek out through the trees was a very quiet and calm time. It would have been a good time to meditate, except that would have ruined the experience.

The other good reason to look forward to breakfast was the 90-minute break. After eating, I was free to bathe, do laundry, or rest. Bathing was a matter of using garden hoses with sprayers hooked up to hot and cold water sources in an outdoor area enclosed by tarps. There was a bucket if you wanted warm water; otherwise, it was freezing cold or burning hot - your choice. I showered only twice during the course and immediately when I got home.

³Some of the directions are left deliberately vague to promote anyone interested in Vipassana to seek out a qualified instructor.

⁴If you find this nickname offensive, you didn't read the books or watch the movies very carefully.

Laundry involved a bucket and a washboard. I'd decided to bring enough clothes that I wouldn't have to do any, but I'd underestimated how dirty socks could get. But with sufficiently low standards of cleanliness, six pair of socks was plenty.

So after breakfast, I always chose to get back in my sleeping bag and enjoy feeling my hands and feet slowly warm up while I fell asleep. By the 8 AM group meditation session, the sun was out in full and the day was rapidly warming. For several reasons, the day wouldn't be as nice again for nine hours.

Today's session was special. After meditating for an entire hour, we had a short break and then were told to come back to the hall. Usually, we'd been allowed to go back to our tents or stay in the hall. Today, we meditated some more and the teachers quietly called us up two at a time. This happened on Days 1, 3, 5, and perhaps 7. There was always a question and then about five minutes of meditating with the teacher and then we were free to lie down for a few minutes.

Today, he asked if we could feel sensations in the target area. When I said yes, he asked what kind. I said I felt the inevitable hopelessness of life and the despair attached to immutable death. The teacher smiled (Vipassana meditators are always smiling) and asked about physical sensations. I said "Oh, like itching and stuff." and he smiled again and said good.

But even when I left, there wasn't much to do. I hadn't come to the course to sleep, and there was enough time for that during breaks anyway. I went back to my tent, passing Bulldog juggling pinecones, held myself to ten minutes of lying down, and then resumed meditating. It was a little easier to focus, mostly because I didn't feel I had to concentrate as hard. I would discover days later what a mistake that was.

Mistakes in my practice were common. On Day 1, since I couldn't focus on my breath with any success, I'd tried a couple different tricks. I imagined a white disc that would glow brighter with inhale and dim with exhale. I'm not sure where that image came from, but it helped me concentrate quite a bit. That night, Goenka said to avoid all visualization activities. Thanks for the late advice, Goenka.

I'd also tried counting breaths. Even when my mind wandered, the count would still be going somewhere in my head. Goenka had said earlier to avoid all verbalization activities. I'd find out on Day 10 that he also meant mental verbalization, not just talking out loud. So I shouldn't have been doing that either.

One of the most depressing dejecting and defeating moments of the course came during the discourse on Day 3. He said tomorrow we would begin Vipassana meditation⁵ and these past three days had been spent on calming the mind and training our focus. The rest of the course would build on this foundation.

Great. I'd spent three days thinking about the metal transformers I'd had as a kid, wondering about an X-Men based graphic novel, and listing the reasons that this course was not doing anything for me⁶ instead of excavating a plot, contracting with a cement company, and getting a permit from the city.

I wasn't even sure I was doing this right; I was trying to observe my breath without changing it, but is it possible to observe something without affecting it? Quantum physicists say no, and I can't argue with quantum physics. I have no blackboards and

⁵Up to this point, we'd been doing *anapana* meditation.

⁶I did not intend or wish for this topic to arise in my mind, but it kept doing so regardless.

very few Greek symbols. So I was pretty sure that everything I'd done up to that point was wrong.

My foundation consisted of three garden stones placed next to each other. Now I was being told I had seven days to build a palace on that. Goenka said nothing about what to do if you are just horrible at this. He will never win the Nobel Prize in Encouragement.

The teacher's role was primarily to press play on the video and audio tapes while sitting in front of the class on what looked like very lush pads, but he⁷ was also available to answer questions every day between noon and 1 PM in the hall. Earlier, I'd put my name on the list for a Day 4 interview, so I'd be able to ask all these questions.⁸

Chapter 3

During the twenty-five centuries since Gautama Buddha taught, Buddhism spread throughout India and Southeast Asia. As it did, it changed forms here and there, with different traditions adding rituals or beliefs and some becoming more or less free from commercialism.

After five centuries, no one in India was practicing strict Vipassana anymore. It was almost lost to the world except for a small group of monks in Burma that kept the practice alive. One of the teachers was Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Teachers are important because they alone pass on the technique to their students; there is no textbook.

And one day, a prominent businessman seeking a cure to his migraines heard about the course. He was taking morphine monthly, had traveled the world in search of a cure, and was willing to try anything. Unfortunately, one is not allowed to attend a course to seek a cure for an ailment, so this businessman, S. N. Goenka, agreed to attend for other benefits they offered.

On Day 10, Goenka told us that he packed up to leave on Day 2, but a fellow student convinced him to stay. What luck that he did because less than fifty years later, Vipassana has not only returned to India but has established centers on every continent. Odds are good that, if you live in the United States, you are within a four-hour drive of a course.

Vipassana proposes to be the original form that Gautama taught⁹. It's certainly the simplest. There is no holy book; there are no saintly figures to admire; there are no rites or rituals to perform; there is no suggested tithe to support the institution. It's focused meditation, and not much else.

There are only a couple parts that can seem a bit religious. For example, before beginning the course, all students are required to say "I take refuge in the Buddha, the dhamma, and the sangha." Sounds almost like a prayer. But remember the Buddha isn't a person, it's an idea or perhaps a state of mind. The dhamma is the teachings that lead to the end of suffering, and the sangha is the community of individuals that continue and

⁷The women had their own teacher. Her duty was not in pressing Play but in saying "Take a short break and then return to the hall" when it was unclear if we should return to the hall.

⁸Technically, one can also ask questions at 9 PM in the hall, but I was so tired I wanted to go immediately to sleep instead of waiting in line.

⁹It's often said that he "rediscovered" the technique. I assume the existence of Buddhas prior to Gautama is the source of this claim.

practice the teachings.

It may still seem religious, but looking for a way to help yourself is a far different proposition than asking God (or divine progeny) for forgiveness or assistance.

The truly remarkable thing about Vipassana is the lack of commercialism. To learn the technique and experience its benefits, one attends a ten-day course with accommodations and food provided (tent courses require you bring a tent). The teachers are all strictly volunteer; they put in as much or as little time as they can spare. In the past, course fees were charged to pay for the expense of hosting a person. But these days, everything is provided for free.

If a very poor person wants to attend simply for the food, they are welcome as long as they work hard. Such is the strength of belief in the power of the technique. Everything is paid for by optional donations accepted at the end of the course. My ability to attend the course was a gift from a person who'd benefited previously. But there's no pressure either; if you don't donate anything, I doubt anyone even notices.

In an age of hedge fund billionaires, this economic model is a major selling point. How could something be given away with the specific instruction that "if you don't find it beneficial, don't do it"?¹⁰ I was curious to find out.

We didn't technically start Vipassana that night. Our new directions were a more specific version of what we'd been doing before. This proved problematic for me. The previous day hadn't gone too badly, but then the two hours of early morning meditation on Day 4 were totally wasted.

Every day, I was trying to spend more time meditating and less time sleeping than the day before, and I was doing that, even if it was just five minutes here and there, but I hadn't felt anything in the manner Goenka told me to. Nothing at all.

I was doing everything I was told to. When Goenka said not to meditate outside, I kept myself inside even though it was very nice out and there were great chairs by the creek that I'd seen other students meditating in. After ten days, I would really understand why chairs were invented.

At breakfast, there was a notice on the board. It read "Today is Vipassana Day. The morning schedule remains the same, but the afternoon schedule is modified as follows. Additionally, there will be no interviews with the teacher today."

My name had been erased from the interview list.

Three more hours of fruitless meditation passed before lunch. I had no idea what I should be feeling or experiencing or whether I was doing something wrong.

Lunch was the best part of the day though. When I heard they served "simple vegetarian meals" I thought that meant the food would be rather bland or we'd have the same things every day. I was very happy to be wrong about this.

Over the course, we'd have stew, fried tofu, a store's variety in vegetables, a couple types of rice, bean/rice/cheese burritos, fruit cobbler, falafel with hummus and tabouli for pita pockets, kale salad, baked potato wedges, and a host of other wonderful dishes in range I wouldn't experience in a month at home. I didn't mind cooking, but here someone else would do the shopping, clean the kitchen, and eat the leftovers.

We cleaned our own plates at the dishwashing station, but there was only soapy water and a scrub brush. I wondered every single time whether the dishes were being

¹⁰After the course, that is. During the course, you are expected to work very hard in order to give the technique a fair trial.

rinsed after our ministrations or if we were consuming a fine residue of soap and food particles with each meal. We probably were, but no one was fussy enough to rewash a dish before using it.

At the end of lunch, the male manager quietly approached Trenton.¹¹ The manager, whose name might have been Brian, was responsible for ringing the gong and attending to student needs outside the teachings. For example, I once asked him for nail clippers, and Gimli asked if he could bring his camp chair into the yurt for the discourse. He whispered to Trenton that he could have an interview today with the teacher, if he still wanted one.

I blinked a few times in disbelief. Brian must have erased my name when he put up the notice. Trenton had boldly written his name on the list despite the note saying no interviews would be given. I tried very hard to tell myself that this was a casual oversight, a human error, not a deliberate slight to me.

I could have said “Well what the hell about me then huh?” and shoved Brian backwards into a tree, but that seemed out of line with the teaching of the course. I was supposed to be calm and whatever, so I went back to my tent.

In only a couple hours, I’d feel much better because I had a new technique to work on instead of repeating the one I wasn’t doing well. That was the only present on Vipassana Day. The celebration involved Goenka talking to us for a while about physical sensation. There was no gaily-decorated tree.

Two evenings before, he’d told us about shila and samadhi, two of the three ideas that will lead to enlightenment. The previous evening, he’d told us about pañña. Pañña is wisdom.

There are three levels to wisdom. The first is the sort of knowledge we obtain from a trusted source like a book or a teacher. The second is what we understand intellectually through rational examination. The third is what we understand by direct experience.

Goenka gave us an example. A critic for the newspaper goes to a restaurant. His friend told him about the place and described it in glowing terms, so he’s inclined to think the restaurant will be very good. Reading the menu, he thinks “Ah, yes, such fine ingredients and the chef studied under someone I admire very much.” Looking around, all the other diners seem very happy and their food looks very appealing. The critic doesn’t then conclude “Yes, the food is very good. I will go write a positive review now.” Only after he tries the food himself does he draw his conclusions.

Wisdom through experience is the heart of Vipassana meditation. The practice does not advocate believing something because you read it in a book or because you hear it from some religious authority or saintly figure, only if you experience for yourself that it’s true.

To become enlightened, then, what should we experience? A universal practice must give every practitioner an experience that doesn’t depend on where a person was born, religious background, age, or even weather. It must be a universal experience that doesn’t require any particular belief, simply an experience of the world “as it is.”

But is there anything permanent we can experience? If you look closely enough at your body, you see that it’s made up of cells which are made up of various parts which are made up of atoms which are themselves composed of subatomic particles the exact

¹¹One of the few students whose names I knew. He was not from New Jersey.

nature of which science still doesn't understand.

A single cell is not a fixed object; it's constantly changing as it converts sugars to energy and builds new molecules even as the existing parts are breaking down. Cells themselves are constantly dying and being replaced. If there is no permanence to a single cell, there is no permanence to any part of our bodies.

Similarly, there is no permanence to our planet because clouds are always forming and disappearing, water is always cycling, and tectonic plates are always creating new crust and taking old crust away. Someday, the sun will exhaust its fuel and swell into a red giant which will engulf the Earth. Nothing in the physical universe lasts forever. Everything, sooner or later, will end.

It is this premise, which is quite impossible to argue with, that we must seek to experience. It's not enough to read it in a book or become an expert in subatomic physics to understand everything rationally through experiments. We must experience it directly.

We do that by sitting quietly, without moving, and observing our physical sensations. Our bodies are constantly changing, so there is always sensation. Our minds shut most of it out to focus on the sensations important to survival, but with a calm and quiet mind, and lots of practice, we can experience the fundamental nature of everything.

Wow!

Unfortunately, it sounds much simpler than it is. Our minds are habituated to attach emotional responses to experiences. If we feel pain, we say "Ow!" and pull away. On a hot day, a cool breeze make us say "Ahhh I want another one of those." It's very hard to experience our sensations when we create these "aversions" and "cravings" for them¹².

What does this mean for a ten-day course? It means that, starting on the afternoon of Day 4, during the group sessions, you try to meditate for the entire hour without opening your eyes or moving your arms or legs.

I'd never tried to sit without moving for a whole hour before. It's uncomfortable no matter what, but due to the previous three days, I was pretty used to some discomfort. The most comfortable position for me was sitting with my legs out in front of me, knees bent and feet flat on the floor and then my arms wrapped around my knees. Cross-legged just didn't seem like an option for a whole hour.

After about fifteen minutes, my butt was noticeably hurting and my back was whispering a spitted anger. We weren't supposed to focus on only the most obvious sensations, but to notice every part of our body in a certain manner. So I told myself not to pay any mind to these crass sensations.

After about thirty minutes, my back was aching like I'd lost a pipe fight, I could feel the bones under my butt protesting their treatment, and the bottoms of my bare feet desperately wanted relief from contact with the floor. I realized I was clenching my shoulders, hands, and anything else, but it was very difficult to force myself to relax.

After forty-five minutes, I was almost shaking with general pain from back, butt, feet, knees, and hips. I felt like crying, but it wasn't quite that bad yet. I reminded myself that this pain was temporary, it wouldn't kill me or even cause me any lasting harm, and I didn't need to react with aversion to it. By this point, meditation was out of the question;

¹²This is Vipassana lingo, which serves well most of the time, but these words do not work in every context, so try to see the idea behind the language instead of focusing on the words themselves.

it took all my concentration to keep still.

Luckily, we didn't have time for a full hour, and Goenka started chanting about five minutes later.¹³ I was actually a little disappointed because the pain in my back, which was by far the worst pain in my body, had changed into a sort of fiery tremor. Strangely, this hurt less than the actual pain, and I was interested in seeing what it was like, but I was more interested in moving.

Moving brought a new sensation to my body, or rather, a new type of agony. Standing up took almost an entire minute. My knees and hips were stiff and aching, and my back wanted very much for me to lie down. But I'd wait a few minutes for that because it was tea time.

This was one of the best parts of the day. We drank tea and ate fruit (returning students only could have lemon water). Usually, there were apples, oranges, and bananas, but today we got a treat: watermelon. I've never been happier or more excited to see it in my life.

When I was walking up the hill, I felt something new, a sense of immeasurable joy; it made me want to laugh and cry at once; nothing in the universe mattered. It was probably caused by some chemical buildup or release from the intense pain of the previous hours, but I didn't care; it was wonderful. I thought six more days of that would be the best thing ever.

No talking was not allowed during the course. In fact, all communication through words, gestures, or looks was forbidden. This was to help calm the mind; conversations and chatter add more to already restless thoughts. Sometimes, I was very glad of this. I was feeling far too good for talking.

After tea and thirty minutes of lying down feeling great, the joyous feeling had passed without notice and it was time for the evening group meditation session (today's extended afternoon session was the one-time Vipassana Day treat). I sat down painfully and wondered how I'd make it through another entire hour. Steak Dinner tromped in and plopped down on his pillow throne in front of me.

On Day 0, there'd been a basket of cushions near the door in the hall. I'd taken one, but hadn't thought it was any better than the simple foam pad so I put it back at the end of the day.

That was another mistake.

By the end of Day 1, I'd gone back to the basket only to discover it was empty. With a quick glance around the room, I saw that most people had at least two cushions, and now there wasn't even one for me.

Steak Dinner had six. On Day 0, he'd done or said something that made me mentally roll my eyes. "This", I'd thought, "is a man about as likely to achieve enlightenment as he is to be served steak for dinner." And now he was sitting regally, elevated about three feet off the ground, in serene and pain free repose.

Another chance to practice my equanimity. This is a word Goenka repeated, and

¹³Goenka chanted at the end of every session for 3-4 minutes. I had no idea what he was saying or what language he was using, but we were assured it wasn't religious or required, simply good wishes for all living beings. The little bit that was translated for us was something like "May all beings find real peace, real happiness" to which the repeat students might respond "Sadhu", which means "Well said, we agree." At any rate, the chanting was nicer to listen to than most pop music.

here I do not exaggerate, about fifty times a day. It means simply a state of not reacting positively or negatively, being calm and collected regardless of what comes your way.

When you see someone you don't particularly like who has six cushions while you have zero and your ass hurts, you may be tempted to think "What a jackass and god I hate that guy." But no, that is a negative thought that pollutes the mind. Far better to think "Ah, I should have taken a pillow on the first day. Well, nothing to be done now (since I can't even talk to ask him if maybe he would share), so I'll make do with what I have." After all, one simple cushion wasn't going to erase all my troubles and the course would be over eventually.

And the new basket of cushions near the door was a good reminder that any negativity was unnecessary. I took a chair cushion, complete with hanging strings to tie to a chair, and sat down, only slightly relieved of pain.

Chapter 4

Before I left, I mentioned to someone that I was going to a "meditation retreat", and he responded "You should come back very well-rested." He probably didn't know what else to say. Imagine, if you will, having nothing to do for ten whole days but meditate. It sounds easy enough, spending time reflecting and thinking and perhaps saying "Ohm"¹⁴ for hours on end, but once you're at the course, you quickly realize it's a lot of work.

They don't make it easy either. You can't bring a stack of magazines or that long novel you've been looking to start reading because these things aren't allowed. You can't bring your cell phone or your laptop or your TV. You can't bring pen and paper to write about the course. No, you meditate or you rest.

In fact, out of eleven male students, three cancelled on the day of the course. I didn't blame them; I'd entertained alluring thoughts of that myself.

There are five precepts you agree to before beginning the course. Do not kill, do not speak untruths, do not steal, do not engage in any sexual activity¹⁵, and do not take any intoxicants. These are pretty easy to follow, minus the occasional mosquito you may want to punish.

Returning students have three additional precepts: do not eat after midday, do not engage in any sensuous entertainment and bodily decoration, and do not use any high and luxurious beds.

Even a general definition of sensuous entertainment wasn't given, but when I saw Trenton skipping stones in the creek on Day 2, I thought that probably qualified. John took up the same activity sometimes. On the last day, there was hardly a stone left in the meadow, those unsuitable for skipping having been used for target practice or simply to make a loud PLUNK noise in the water.

At first, I'd spent all my free time sleeping. Thirty minutes here and there throughout the day felt wonderful and really passed the time, but after Day 3, I hadn't been able to fall asleep again. Odd, I thought, since I got seven hours of sleep and woke up at 4.

¹⁴This is not part of Vipassana or most meditation practices around the world.

¹⁵This is alternately stated sometimes as not to commit any sexual misconduct or to maintain celibacy.

After that, I spent almost all my free time lying in my tent. I'd wanted to use the abundant sticks from fallen trees to rig up a framework that I could attach my tent's rainfly to for shade without getting the greenhouse atmosphere of a tent left in the sun, but it didn't seem practical without rope, a saw, and a computerized design program.

Goenka had said days 2 and 6 would be the worst. So when I was watching the discourse on Day 6, practicing sitting still for at least 20 minutes instead of restlessly shifting position every five minutes like my body wanted to, I was glad that I didn't feel like bolting again. The day hadn't gone that well, in that I didn't have any particular breakthroughs or feel like I'd come any closer to enlightenment, but it was enough today that I didn't feel terrible.

I'd experienced interesting things the previous couple days. The joy of Day 4 hadn't been repeated, nor did I think it was likely to. The pain hadn't been that bad since. In retrospect, maybe I should have tried for longer than an hour, but we weren't supposed to actively seek sensations, just observe what did happen.

Since we'd started Vipassana, Goenka kept reminding us to focus on sensation, any sensation would do. Heat, cold, perspiration, itching, heaviness, he could list at least twenty things we might feel.

When I tried to feel for anything on, say, my shoulder, I wasn't aware of anything. Ever. But then, at some point, it occurred to me that I knew I was wearing a shirt, so obviously there was some sensation on a large swath of my body that was aware of non-nudity. I didn't feel a shirt on my shoulder though. So I stepped back a little bit and saw, ah, there it was, if I felt for the whole area it was obvious the sensation of shirtedness was there. And then, when I concentrated, I could tell where the neckline was and how the fabric was draping and where the sleeves ended.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

I'd been getting up and making it to the hall at 4:30 for the past few days. I wasn't totally free from laziness though: I'd figured out exactly how late I could lie down (4:18) and still make it on time. I've never been an early riser, or even good at getting up on time for any job with a less-than-rigorous start time, so I was a little surprised that I was able to be meditating so early.

Similarly, I'd been taking shorter breaks during the multi-hour meditation periods. I'd walk back to my tent, lie down for five minutes, and then head back to the hall. With the walking distance, that could be a twenty-minute break, but it was far better than going to sleep for thirty minutes.

Other things were taking longer to come along. Not every time did I make it to the end of the hour without moving; strangely, the pain was never so overwhelming that I had to move, it was that I couldn't concentrate on meditation for very long. So I'd change positions when the discomfort was just moving toward pain. Sounds strange, but when I *could* concentrate, the pain didn't bother me as much as when my mind was restless and always looking for relief.

And my concentration problems of the first few days hadn't gone away. The morning of Day 5, I'd been practically excited to experience the pain of sitting and see where it led and what I could learn from it. I'd tried different positions, including resolving myself to sitting cross-legged for the remainder of the course, but the novelty wore off pretty quickly.

When Day 7 started, I thought "Wow! Only three days left!" This was terrible

math, of course, because I had days 7, 8, 9, and 10: four days. Plus, the course actually ended on the morning of Day 11. I'd been using these tricks of math to convince myself that I was nearing done since Day 3 when I woke up thinking "Hey tomorrow is Day 4. That's a pretty big chunk of the course down."

By Day 6, I'd been counting down the number of mornings, breakfasts, and group meditation sessions left (five, five, and fifteen).

I'd worked hard on Day 5 and Day 6 though, putting in a lot more hour-long sessions than previously. I wanted to see what the point was behind the pain that was evidently central to the course. Goenka hadn't been entirely encouraging again though; he never talked about pain, only "crass sensation"¹⁶ Starting around Day 5, he'd started saying that sometimes we would feel blind areas of no sensation, sometimes areas of uniform subtle sensation, and sometimes areas of crass sensation.

I was an expert in areas of no sensation, and the more I worked, the better I became at feeling these crass sensations. The uniform subtle sensations, however, were coming along very slowly.

What exactly this means is very hard to explain without the experience, but on Day 3 and the morning of Day 4, we were supposedly sharpening our perception so we could feel very subtle sensations that the mind would otherwise overlook.

To my surprise, it worked.

After a certain time, I could feel something on my face. Not any sensation that has a name, just that there was indeed *something* happening. At first, I thought maybe it was a trick of my mind, but it felt slightly different in different spots on my body and became easier to find the more I looked for it. I'll call it the tinglies even though it wasn't exactly a tingling.

Starting around Day 6, Goenka started saying the crass sensations (pain) would "dissolve" into these subtle sensations. I'd been hurting myself a lot since we'd started Vipassana, and all I felt was pain. I approached the pain with equanimity though; it wasn't like I was being stabbed or had stomach cancer.

It was much harder to be equanimous to not being able to keep up with the course. I realized my foundation was horrible and my mind perhaps not very good going into the course, but 3-5 reminders a day that I wasn't coming along very well was hard to bear.

So by the middle of Day 7, I was feeling pretty bad. My back had somehow stopped hurting over the last few days (it was accustomed to the abuse), but every time I sat down, my joints would say "no no no no no" and the pain didn't seem to be for any purpose except to be in pain.

And I had four days left. What was the point of sticking around if I was only going to be further and further behind the whole time? Goenka kept saying that it is the nature of everything to arise and pass away, arise and pass away, and I agreed: the pain ended as soon as I stopped inflicting it on myself.

He said it was very important to experience pleasant sensations with equanimity as well, otherwise we'll just condition our minds to wait out the sensations we don't like in hopes a nicer one will come along. The point is to have a calm and balanced mind all the time, not just sometimes.

¹⁶If you don't know what an ethnic Indian with a Burmese accent speaking English sounds like, pronounce the word "crass" the same as the word "gloss". I'm still not sure which he was saying because both seemed to fit at different times.

He said that some people come to the course only want the good feeling they get when the pain dissolves. How disheartening to think I was not experiencing that, and wasn't even very close judging by his other words.

I couldn't even remember why I was there. Intellectually, I could remind myself, but I didn't feel anymore what I expected to get out of the course. I was there, meditating/en-painening myself, simply because I was. There was no purpose anymore, only time passing.

Goenka made it worse that afternoon. He started saying we should "sweep en masse¹⁷ in a free flow". What the hell did that mean? I'm sure it made sense to him, but what the hell was I supposed to do? Apparently, sit here like a jackass stuck on Day 5 and just think about how much I was wasting my time even trying to do this when obviously I wasn't cut out for it.

I mean yeah, I could feel tinglies on some parts of my body, but only maybe 20% of my skin area, and that had taken me days. One of the previous days, he'd told a story.

There is a boy whose mom gives him ten rupees to buy a bottle of cooking oil at the store. He is coming back from the store when he trips and falls and spills half the oil. He runs home crying and says "Oh no oh no I spilled half the oil!"

Another boy, same incident, runs home and says "I tripped and fell and the bottle almost broke, but I saved half the oil!" Notice this boy is very positive, and the first boy was very negative.

A third boy, same incident again, runs home and says "I could have lost it all, but I saved half of it." But this boy is a Vipassana boy, so he says "But, I also lost half the oil. I will go out and work very hard to earn five rupees to replace the oil I lost by the end of the day." This boy is not optimistic or pessimistic, but realistic, and he has a solution to resolve his troubles.

This was Goenka's metaphor for Vipassana in general. Our lives have suffering, sure, but we can remove ourselves from this suffering through hard work.

But I kept thinking if that Vipassana boy had ten hours to earn five rupees and, at the end of seven hours, he'd only earned one rupee, he might have concluded that three more hours of hard work was extremely unlikely to net him another four and gone home to tend to his other chores and duties and maybe tried to earn the rest of the money some other time.

It just seemed stupid to sit around not getting anywhere when I could be home doing ... well, okay I had nothing to do at home and I'd already paid the cat sitter, but still, I was wasting my time in this course.

And sweep? Like a push broom? Or maybe like sweeping the floor, or maybe circularly like a street sweeper? Thanks for the great nonspecific advice, Goenka. You're a HUGE help.

Also helpful was having written my name on the interview list and having it erased AGAIN. Screw you all, staff members.

Goddamn everything and whatever. I went back to my tent and lay down. I didn't really want to leave; I wanted to do better. I wanted to understand what I was supposed to understand already.

And that wasn't going to happen while lying in my tent being pissed off.

After fifteen minutes, I went back to the hall to try again.

¹⁷Might also be "on mass", "off mast", or "in mask"

Chapter 5

Goenka talked a lot about equanimity. If my neighbor insults me and makes me angry, I might be angry for hours thinking “Oh how I hate my neighbor he is such a pig dog and a thousand curses upon him!” I may tell my wife or my friends about how wicked my neighbor is and how he deserves such bad things for being such a bad person.

Meanwhile, he may have forgotten all about the insult and be in his home laughing with his family and enjoying delicious food and his favorite television program.

Insulting me didn’t hurt him; my anger doesn’t hurt him. Every time I think about it again for hours, days, or maybe years, I may become so furious I am unable to think about anything else. Reacting angrily to his insult only hurts me. Taking revenge on him is no solution because it won’t remove the anger I’ve felt in the past and will only encourage him to insult me again, adding to the cycle of suffering.

If I had more equanimity, however, I might think “He is insulting me because he is upset about a disagreement at work. He’s not really angry with me; he is suffering because he is angry with someone else.” By not accepting his insult, he would not spread his own suffering to me.

The bitter truth is that our emotions only exist in our own minds. If we accept that as fact, we have to accept that no one else makes us unhappy. We are responsible for 100% of our own unhappiness. This is very hard to swallow because, let’s face it, most of the people we meet are assholes, jerks, bitches, dumbasses, and idiots. If only they would be better people, we would be much happier.

But no one, no matter how much power he has, can order everyone in the world to be better people. All we can do is condition ourselves to experience the world as it is and not add to our suffering due to it.

We suffer from two causes. First, bad things happen to us. You may be insulted or a relative may die or you may stub your toe. The suffering here is obvious. The other cause is when we want something that we don’t get.

For example, suppose I meet a girl who I think is so wonderful and so beautiful and so funny and charming and I may want very much to go out with her. I may imagine my life with her as my girlfriend and think everything would be so wonderful and my life so perfect. Then when I ask her out, she may politely decline. Ah, such suffering then.

Or I may want a promotion very much and work very hard and dream about what it will be like to have an office and more money and recognition of my dedication. Then it may go to the boss’s friend even though he’s lazy and stupid. And after I worked so hard! How could they do that to me!? How upset I become then.

This is the “craving” mentioned earlier. It’s simply becoming too attached to what we want. This one’s harder to understand because we should certainly enjoy things and look for things to make us happy, but once we’ve set unrealistic expectations, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Even if you believe all of that, there’s one piece missing here. How does being equanimous to sitting in pain for an hour help us be equanimous to these other things? Goenka said that when we crave something very strongly, it’s not the thing itself we want, but the sensation we get when we have it. Think about how a new car or a new job makes you feel. Satisfied, exalted, accomplished? If we don’t crave these sensations, we won’t place such importance on the things that generate them.

I wanted to do better in meditation. I wanted to leave the course feeling such peace and compassion for all living things. I wanted to experience the dissolution of pain into uniform subtle sensations. I wanted to achieve perfect equanimity toward my sensations and extend that into everything in life.

And it wasn't happening. And how dejected I felt. I even realized this during the last two days of the course and told myself I should not be attached to the outcome of the course, but rational arguments never work to calm emotional minds.

It's the paradox Goenka mentioned: if you want enlightenment too much, you can't achieve it. When Gautama sat under the Bodhi tree, he was probably calm and patient. He believed that if he sat there for long enough, he would find true happiness. He didn't become frustrated after an hour and leave in disgust.

Even Steak Dinner seemed to be doing well. He was in the hall almost all the time, seemingly never moving or being at all restless. I think by the end, he was regularly meditating without changing positions for over an hour. Maybe I had been wrong about him. Or maybe those six cushions really helped.

I had been counting down the days since the beginning. On Day 5, I told myself the course was half over even though that wouldn't be true until the end of the day. By Day 7, I woke up and thought "Tomorrow when I wake up, I will think 'Tomorrow is Day 9 and that means only one day left!'" That was triply convoluted.

But the truth is I *did* want to leave, very badly much of the time. It would be obvious, weeks after I returned home, that if I was so far behind the class and so impatient for it to end, I didn't need to leave at all. I needed thirty days.

Such courses do exist, but they're rarely extended to new students. And I never would have signed up for one anyway.

During the discourse that night Day 7, Goenka told us that we had only two days left to seriously work because we'd be allowed to talk again on Day 10. I simultaneously thought "Oh noes I am so far behind and have such a short amount of time to catch up." and "Sweet! Now I can count down to a closer goal!"

Chapter 6

A man went to Gautama Buddha and said "Please, sir, my father has died and I want him to be happy in the next life." The Buddha says "You want me to perform some rite or ritual to help your father? I can do nothing of the sort." The man pleads "But sir you are such a holy man and so renowned I know you must be able to do something."

The Buddha says "Go to the market and buy two pots. Fill one with stones and the other with butter and seal them tightly." The man is very happy that the Buddha will perform a ritual to ensure his father goes to heaven or is reborn with a stockpile of good kamma (karma, in Sanskrit) or whatever.

When the man comes back with the pots, the Buddha says "Throw them in the pond, and then smash them with a stick." In those days, it was common to burn the bodies of the deceased and then smash the skull; this would fling wide the doors of heaven.

The pots sink in the pond. The man smashes them both and the stones stay at the bottom, but the butter floats to the top.

"There", says the Buddha, "now you ask me to make the stones float. If you fill your life with stones, you will sink, but if you fill it with butter, you will float. That is

simply fact; no one can change it.”

The man was probably very disappointed that he wasted his money on butter and pots, but the Buddha’s point was clear.

Some religions say you can achieve salvation (which is the end goal of life and the end of suffering, much as enlightenment is the goal of Vipassana) by accepting someone as your savior or by following a certain set of rules or by obeying a religious authority.

Vipassana makes it a little harder. You achieve good kamma by following the path to enlightenment. When you harm yourself or others, you stray from the path. There is no last-minute deathbed conversion; you must continually walk on the path. It’s a lot of work.

When we react emotionally to events, Goenka explained, we generate sankharas. These stay with us through this life and continue when we are reborn¹⁸. At the end of a day, if someone asked you what happened to you during the day, you’d probably have one or two things that stood out. At the end of the month, you wouldn’t remember one or two things per day, just one or two big things for the whole month.

That doesn’t mean nothing else mattered during the month; you still have an accumulation of experiences that made you the person you are. If these are good experiences, if you avoided suffering through equanimity and made the world a better place by lessening the suffering of other creatures, you’ll have a month’s worth of butter in your jar.

But if you screamed obscenities in traffic, indulged in mean-spirited gossip, or deliberately offended or hurt someone, your jar will be filled with stones, and, unfortunately, you will sink.

Sankharas are the accumulated emotional reactions to the world, the very things that bring us suffering. A strong craving or aversion response generates a deep sankhara. Think about something in the past that made you very upset. Are you still upset when you think about it now? Then the event, which may be long over, is still causing you suffering today.

As you meditate, Goenka explained, these sankharas will come to the surface and, if you react with equanimity to them, they will dissolve. You’re not dissolving suffering, merely your past history of generating it. Practicing this reduces the amount you will generate in the future.

And when you do not experience or generate suffering in any form, you are completely liberated. Your back may hurt and your knees may ache, but these are simply sensations, like any other. They’ll pass, in time, and in the meantime they don’t control you or demand all your attention. You can meditate for an hour with both feet asleep and smile while you think “I wonder how long they will hurt when they wake up again.”

Nearing this state is probably why so many Buddhists are happy so often. If nothing made me suffer, why wouldn’t I be happy? My mind would be in a persistent state of peace. I’d be free from pain, free from misery, free from disappointment. I’d never be impatient or petty or lazy again. I could have the life I wanted to have, instead of the life I ended up with.

But this path is so long. It feels like waking up after a wine-heavy night and going

¹⁸If you don’t really believe this reincarnation idea, you’re not alone. Just ignore it if you like.

to run a marathon. The journey may begin with a single step, but at some point the path seems so difficult that few people even lace up their shoes.

Still, even without reaching total enlightenment, a small reduction in suffering could have tremendous benefits. It was better to try than not.

I had discovered a big mistake I'd been making. When Goenka said to observe a blind spot for a minute, I didn't realize he meant to focus intently on it. When I'd realized that on Day 8, I found tinglies everywhere I looked, if I concentrated really hard. And then I had a great, maybe even groundbreaking, session that evening. The pain never dissolved, but I was definitely making progress; this was how it should have been going days ago. With more time, I'd make more progress.

Then I was given the wonderful opportunity to practice my equanimity when every subsequent session was worse again. I was trying to be patient, with a calm and quiet mind, but in the middle of Day 9, Goenka was talking about feeling the entirety of the body, inside and out, passing the attention up and down the spinal column, feeling all sensations dissolved and reacting to them all with equanimity.

I felt like I was trying to work through a page of long division problems while the class was solving linear equations and the teacher had moved on to complex multivariable analysis¹⁹. It was hard to be patient in the face of that. And he said "This is the last day to work seriously." No pressure though! I was so mad at the course and myself and Goenka even though I knew how pointless that was and that I shouldn't feel that way.

And no matter how often I reminded myself to calm down, be patient, just keep trying, I'd find myself frustrated or irritated or annoyed again soon.

But the course was almost over. I was excited to leave and more anxious than ever for it to be over already. Ten days hadn't seemed so long when I signed up.

Apparently it was too long for some people. On Day 8, after the morning session, Vagabond didn't come back to the hall. Later, I noticed his tent was gone. It seemed strange to leave so late; after so much time spent there, I was certainly going to stick it out even if that was throwing good money after bad.

Of course, he didn't necessarily leave because he was fed up. Maybe a phone call came in with a family emergency. Maybe he contracted appendicitis. I decided it was probably one of these two, but I'd find out on Day 10 that he was a returning student who didn't have quite enough time for the whole course.

Overall, Day 9 didn't go very well at all. It should have been easy to be calm since the course was almost over, but I didn't want to leave thinking I'd accomplished nothing, that I'd wasted my time there. I'd certainly been trying hard, but I was dreading anyone asking me how it went and how I'd manage to put a positive spin on something I'd gotten nothing out of.

The highlight of the day may have been the tea break. There was lemon juice again. I'd noticed more phlegm in my throat over the past week than usual; it was quite annoying when trying to meditate. Whether there was actually more or I was just noticing my usual condition was never resolved, but I'd tried some lemon juice and hot water on Day 3. It seemed to help a little bit. After drinking it, I was surprised to see the lemon juice bottle in the trash. It held ninety-six servings and somehow half a bottle was gone by the time I got to tea and the time I left.

¹⁹If you don't know what this is, consider yourself lucky.

There was no lemon juice the next day. When it reappeared on Day 5, I watched to see who the juice-guzzling culprit was. Trenton drank a glass of lemon water in ten seconds and went back for another quarter bottle. Steak Dinner poured some into his glass and promptly added more and then a little more without sampling. Vagabond poured a half cup of it for himself, saw there were only 10-15 servings left, and downed the rest for good measure.

I imagine the staff had to buy more for us, but there were no stores within twenty miles. So we had lemon juice every 2-3 days. Perhaps as a consolation drink, coffee started appearing with the tea accoutrements late in the course. Unfortunately, it was instant coffee which is not improved by a weeklong lack of brewed.

Such an intense focus on lemon juice shows how little there was to do during the course.

By this time, I knew how many hours were left until the course ended. I didn't understand why the course didn't conclude right when we were allowed to talk again if we couldn't work seriously. During the discourse, Goenka said some people found the transition back to regular life rather jarring, but I didn't see how.

In a standard week in my life, I'd talk with maybe ten people; six were cashiers and clerks at various stores, one was a co-worker I was getting tips from, one was my mom who liked to hear from me to remind me how she didn't hear from me, and the other two were my cats.

The silence hadn't affected me much at all. Instead of a pointless day chatting, I would have much preferred to leave. But we were also doing something special on the last day; we were learning a new technique. So I didn't mind staying for that, at least.

Goenka talked a lot that night about how great and wonderful Vipassana is. He told a story about the first president of Burma after the country threw off British imperial rule. He was appointed to the powerless post only to appease the various princes who'd ruled territories before independence. A lifelong alcoholic, he'd been passed out drunk at state dinners and then vomited when roused enough to come to the table.

The first thing he'd been fed when he was born was an expensive spirit from a golden spoon. He argued at length that he be allowed to drink during the course, even just a small amount each day because there was no way he could ever go without. But eventually, he agreed to forswear alcohol for the sake of joining the course because he saw so many happy people on the last day. When he finished the course, he was a changed man. Even smelling the alcohol someone else was drinking across the room made him feel ill.

It's a pretty good advertisement for the merit of the technique. I didn't feel transformed though, not even any different from when I started. I felt mostly disappointed. I hadn't expected much from the course, but I felt like I'd achieved nothing. Businesspeople, princes and prisoners left the course happier and more at peace. I was going to leave the same.

But it was only 34.5 hours, three group sessions, two breakfasts, one lunch, and one tea break before I could go home. I was very glad to go to sleep that night.

Chapter 7

Driving to the course, I'd used the directions on the course's website. Driving home, I'd obeyed the Internet. I'm sad to report the Internet lost by a wide margin. It was

Sunday morning, so there wasn't much traffic, but I'd left much later than I thought I would.

No one had mentioned cleanup until Day 10. Then there were sign-up sheets for food inventory, kitchen cleanup, shower takedown, and the one I signed up for, cleaning the yurt.

Cleaning it was a matter of taking all the cushions, TV, stereo, chairs, heaters, lamps, and other items to the house. The site was donated by someone who'd taken the course, lived in the house, and apparently rented out cabins during the summer.

We took down tarps separating men's and women's sides and someone drove a pick-up truck down the hill to haul everything back up. It was a confused event because one person knew what went back to the Vipassana office, someone else knew what went into the house, and the other six of us were mostly looking for direction.

But after that, there was still plenty of work left around the house. More than I ever would have expected. Twenty-five people were working/talking for several hours to get everything packed and stored. I helped move a couple tables and take out trash until about 9:30.

The course had technically ended at breakfast, which I suppose was at 6:30, but there was no departure gong or final announcement. Goenka had given us a discourse that morning, following one the night before. I'd toyed with sleeping in, but got up to meditate around 4:30 as usual. I couldn't sleep anyway.

The previous day certainly had been filled with chatter. Around ten, after morning meditation, a sign was staked outside the yurt saying that we could talk now. I walked off quickly, mostly because I had to use the bathroom but also because I didn't feel like talking.

That session hadn't gone well. The new technique translates usually to "loving-kindness." Goenka promised it would be a balm to soothe the surgical operation of the past nine days. Instruction in this technique started with his saying "Only practice it when you feel calm and at peace, when there is no trace of negativity in your mind."

Ah, more good news: I shouldn't even try it. I watched my watch until we were permitted to leave.

And that's how the rest of the day went. In between listening to people talk about sports, comedy routines, food, and occasionally the course itself, we meditated and learned about resources to support continuation of our practice.

One hour in the morning and one hour in the evening, Goenka said, then also five minutes when waking up and five minutes before falling asleep. If we can make a strong determination to do that for a year, we will be Vipassana meditators for life and enjoy all the wondrous benefits of this wondrous technique.

We could easily find the time for this because of the increases in concentration would mean we could get more done in less time, and we'd sleep more soundly so we'd find ourselves sleeping an hour less a night.

More promises I couldn't validate.

Also at least one ten-day course each year and one group session every week. And practice continuously by always noticing sensation on your body regardless of what you're doing.

Despite all that, I did feel calm driving home. It was a beautiful day in

mid-August in Oregon. I stopped for real coffee at a shack and waited fifteen minutes for the person in front of me to drive off. I wasn't sure what he ordered, but I distinctly heard the phrases "quail eggs", "stamen of a spring tulip", and "steamed milk." I only said "Oh come ON!" once, and that was half-hearted. I'd be home soon enough.

I had been very aware of how well I'd not done in the course. The other men didn't look like extremely happy and saintly men on the last day, so I wondered how they'd done.

Around Day 4, I'd changed Skinhead's name to Kung Fu partly because he didn't look the part after a few days' of hair growth and partly because an actual skinhead would not attend such a course. Also, I'm pretty sure he wore martial arts pants a lot. On the final morning, he'd talked about trying to quit smoking and always going back to it when he was upset about something; it was, as he said, his safety blanket.

I'd asked him if he thought Vipassana helped with that. He'd said "Yeah, I don't know. Maybe."

I didn't know either, but after ten days of being quiet and sitting still, the mind goes through a lot of one's life. I imagine any ten-day course with similar rules, regardless what was specifically being taught, would produce calmer people simply from having the time apart from daily matters to focus on what was really happening in the mind.

Listening to the other men, it didn't sound like anyone had the sort of transformational experience that we'd heard about. There were a lot of jokes made, the sort anyone would make after listening to Goenka talk so seriously for so long. Maybe everyone had serious introspections but we wanted a break from working and thinking.

Don't think the course wasn't work either. When I left, I felt like I needed a vacation from spending so much time every day concentrating. It's very tiring.

We were assured the work paid off. Goenka himself seemed very happy. And he wanted us to be happy too. He wanted real happiness for every living thing. In the discourse on Day 10, he'd asked "When you have happiness, do you want to share it with others?"

I'd thought "Yeah, I try to. It doesn't seem to work really."

He continued. "Or when you have unhappiness, do you share that with others?"

"Um, sometimes I guess."

"Do you spread negativity to others and bring down everyone around you?"

"...why don't you shut up."

On Day 8, I'd invented for myself the game "Appreciate the Moment" which consisted of reminding myself of the good things that were happening to me at that moment. The game quickly got repetitive with responses such as "Nice day, nothing I have to do, good lunch, slept very well last night" and so on, but it seemed helpful sometimes just to list these concrete reminders.

The drive home was nice. The time and miles passed quickly, and I never felt impatient to be there already. I had pizza and a chair waiting for me. They'd be there whenever I arrived.

The entire course had been an exercise in equanimity. It was ten days of practicing to be patient and calm despite discomfort, fatigue, missing home or friends, being hungry or tired or wanting a real bed or dinner. No matter what I felt, it had eventually passed away.

I wish the story had a happier ending. I wish I could say I came home and meditated for an hour and all my pain dissolved and then I tried the loving-kindness and felt so wonderful and started spreading that joy to everyone I met.

Goenka said mastering our minds is like taming an elephant. It takes large stores of patience and time, but the reward is the entire strength of an elephant harnessed for our purposes.

Over the next weeks, I thought often about the course and the teachings. At first, I only left my apartment once in three days, but after this recovery period I was walking from car to store noticing a breeze on my fingertips and the straps of my sandals across my feet. I was warmer where the sun was on my black shirt; the tip of my ear itched, but it would stop whether I scratched it or not.

It was very calming to focus on these sensations rather than the traffic or the time. I thought about how upset I'd been during the course and how useless and foolish that was, but I didn't think of myself with any embarrassment or shame, only with equanimity.

The course itself had caused me more suffering than a hundred days of my normal life. I'd taken all my problems with me where they were brought into the open and magnified. There was no distraction with books or video games or wine, only time to consider them.

If the course had come with a disclaimer that it was very difficult and I might not have learned anything from it and I might go home the same, I probably wouldn't have been so frustrated so often, but I wouldn't have experienced it for myself, and the lesson would have been lost.

I still didn't know how to be at peace; the course certainly hadn't been a one-shot solution. But I'd keep trying. There wasn't much else to do.