

## STILLNESS, MY FINAL FRONTIER: TEN DAYS AT MEDITATION BOOT CAMP

### *Before*

First they laughed. Friends raised eyebrows and guffawed when I told them I'd signed up for a ten day Vipassana Meditation course at a Buddhist retreat center.

"You?" they exclaimed, "Come on, I've sat next to you at meetings, you'll never sit still and be silent ten days!" Some offered to bet on how long I'd last.

Listening to the rules, even my buddies who had done retreats said, "You've signed up for a nunnery! Vipassana is *the* most austere method Pat. No journal, pens, books, sketchpad. Just you and your thoughts!"

My therapist commended my courage and reminded me I choose extreme things. "You're free to leave, but go committed," she said. "You'll make it, if you get through the first three days."

The closet quiet person inside this active human doing that most of my acquaintances see cherishes Tai Chi. Multi-tasking, focusing on movement *and* breathing works for me. I love the day long silent retreats my teacher holds every other month when we move ever so slowly to lovely positions like "ocean currents" and "sea waves." Tai Chi, after first sorting my 'To Do' list and letting it go, has been the only way I could meditate successfully so far.

I trusted a friend who'd done this Vipassana course. Although she said parts were torture, parts ecstasy, the peace she radiated was visible. That e-word was enough for me. Everything pointed toward my developing a daily spiritual practice. This could be the first step.

Worth the ride, I thought as I wrote on my application, "I want mental discipline to write better." I answered questions about my health, use of prescription and illicit substances and was accepted a month in advance.

Then, I freaked out. I was a nervous wreck. Could I really do without talking for almost two weeks? Would I develop secret means of communicating with my friend who'd also signed

up? What demons might arise that I'd ostensibly conquered? My agitation continued 'till the day before I left, when my therapist said I was doing the workshop before it started.

"Listen," she said reading from The California Vipassana Center's brochure, "It's 'a technique to eradicate suffering...to make positive contributions to society...a means of mental purification...to face life's tensions in a calm, balanced way.' The human suffering part is a bit lofty," she said. "But it's what you're looking for, isn't it?"

My husband of twelve years stayed calm through my panic.

"How'd you feel if you were doing this?" I challenged him.

"This is about Not-Doing, Pat. You'll make it. I wish I *were* doing it with you."

### ***During***

Accommodations were sparse, yet the narrow bed was comfortable, and my little cubicle had a window overlooking a grape arbor. There were about one hundred people from all over the world. At the last evening meal we'd have for ten days, only fruit and tea served at 5:00 p.m. thereafter, I met a woman from Vietnam, two girls who had hitchhiked from Quebec, and a bejeweled woman from India.

A short video was shown explaining The Code of Discipline we'd all signed: to abstain from intoxicants, all forms of killing any living creature (even the fruit flies?), no stealing, no decoration (my ears thanked me), and complete celibacy. Fine for me I thought, but what about the men?

We agreed to suspend other forms of prayer, worship, or ceremony such as fasting, mantras, and use of crystals. This was not to condemn any other practice, but to experience Vipassana in its purity. We were to meditate exactly as asked, and hold the rules with acceptance, discrimination and understanding, not blind submission.

The din at the delicious vegetarian repast, shared with forty-five women I would not even be making eye contact with for the next ten days, was deafening! I asked one young woman who'd done this several times before, why she keeps returning.

"For the feeling the last day. There's nothing like it. I can't describe it. Wait and see."

### ***Days One to Three: Anapana***

I didn't hear the gong at 4 a.m. for the 4:30-6:30 optional meditation, read by me as *very* optional. I'd heard mainly the old students went. Stretching to grow did not include my completely changing my sleep patterns. Breakfast included hot cereal, prunes every day, fresh fruit, bread, and rice cakes. I'd weaned myself from caffeine and gotten over the fuzziness and the headaches. Tea was fine.

The first morning in the dimly lit meditation hall we were assigned cushions, and instructed to surround ourselves with as many pillows and blankets as we liked. This was to assure sitting tall for the required meditation times--8:00-9:00 a.m., 2:30-3:30 p.m., and 6:00-7:00 p.m. and for the videotaped lecture from our Burmese teacher S.N. Goenka from 7:15-9:15 p.m. That was followed by another short meditation applying the new instructions he'd give us for the next day. Lights-out and bedtime were at 9:30.

I can't remember that first eyes-closed hour of sitting except its utter interminability. My mind wandered to everything from whether my back could take this, to my son at Navy Seal training hell week, and the memo I'd forgotten to dictate. But I did as told and focused on respiration. Innnn-hale. Exxxx-hale.

What I was unprepared for the first night, was the sound of guru Goenka's voice. It was the lowest, most guttural scraping sound I'd ever heard!

"I have to pay attention to this? I'm outta here!"

His instructions and intonations in barely discernable English ended with the returning students chanting, "*Saad ooo...Saaa...doooo...Saaaahh...Doooo*," bowing when our in-house teacher stopped the meticulously timed tape, and we could finally open our eyes. He told us to return after five minutes.

Outside the sun was shining, warming the crisp fall air. I stood mesmerized, watching as one drop of water descended a chain from a copper gutter, dancing past a spider web. Mmmmmmm, I thought. My consciousness does seem slightly altered. When's the last time I noticed something as miniscule as that?

When we returned the lights were dimmed, another tape inserted, and I heard Goenka's unwelcome groan, "Start again, staaarrt, a-gaaiin, with a calm and quiet mind. Focus on res-pir-ation. Practice per-sist-ent-ly, dil-i-gent-ly...and you will be successful."

At that point I wanted to run away. To my relief, new students were excused to practice in their rooms, while returning students received some special instructions. I'd been told that no

one checked if you were in your room, so I went to the pond to find a small rock, my rock-of-the-day. Each night I would put one on my windowsill.

The 2:30 and 6 o'clock meditations were much the same. I made it through each hour sitting fairly still and upright, but by the time of Goenka's evening lecture, my position was nearly prone. I was invited to sit with a wall at my back, and gratefully accepted.

Day one's videotaped discourse addressed staying the full time period. To help us not think about leaving, we were to consider ourselves in prison. It sure felt like that. It brought up empathy for those brothers and sisters on the real inside doing jail time. How did Nelson Mandela do it? Twenty-seven years! Ten days was nothing. Gratitude for my freedom filled me.

Goenka opened every evening's lecture as his did the first, by acknowledging our getting through the day: "You have completed day one. Good. You have nine more to work. Make the best of this opportunity."

The first time I heard this I wanted to throw something at the screen. The second day I raised my arms *Yes!* breaking the rule of Noble Silence, but few observed me.

By the third day I'd calmed down and merely visualized putting my third rock on the windowsill in two more hours. Ten days still seemed a very, very long time. On breaks I scanned the sky for changes in the weather, once even wishing a natural disaster would rescue me to break the monotony.

For three days we focused on respiration, narrowing that to the tiny area below the nostrils and above the upper lip. I don't remember how I did it. Once in spite of warnings to give up visualization, I saw an animated movie of hundreds of huge noses expanding and contracting simultaneously. At the end of day three, we were congratulated and told that these first days' practices were preparation for the essence of Vipassana, which would come tomorrow.

### ***Days Four Through Nine: Vipassana***

By morning four I was bored, satiated with my upper lip, sick of my nose, and oh-so looking forward to something different. At breakfast, in addition to the signs about honoring *Sittings of Full Determination*, i.e. don't disturb others if you cannot sit for sixty minutes cross-legged, a new schedule appeared for Vipassana Day.

From 9:00-11:00 we were to stay in the meditation hall and receive instructions for the central tool of this practice. Goenka in his droll voice--which by now sounded less like sandpaper and more like a concerned teacher--instructed us for two hours straight.

We were to move our attention systematically from head to feet and feet to head, observing in order, each part of our bodies. We were to observe objectively; remain *equanimous* with all sensations experienced, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral in order to appreciate their impermanent nature. Keep our attention moving. Never focus more than a few minutes on any one place.

After those two hours, which felt like two minutes, I felt hypnotized. I hadn't wondered when the time would end! Finally something to do! What a trip! I found myself in the sun, leaning against the wall of the bathrooms, sobbing. Something had happened. Something deep, almost out of my grasp. That's all it is? Impermanence? Nothing stays the same? How many different ways do I have to *get* this concept? I could hear Sister Monica singing "Everything Must Change."

As day four melted slowly into day five, then six, then seven, Goenka instructed us to scan our bodies going down and up each side, first separately, then simultaneously. View the chest and back, both arms, simultaneously and symmetrically. If off balance, pull the energies together into one. Go interior to deeper levels, to focus on sensation cell by cell. At one point I felt I was giving my body a massage from the inside, a slow deep fantastic massage. I wondered what medical research was being done on this. I thought of my sister in law with lung cancer, my brother in law with Parkinson's and wondered if military or sports pros used mind training of this sort.

While there wasn't a single session in which my mind didn't wonder when I'd hear Goenka's final chants; each day he sounded happier, like he was singing ditties to us. I chanted and bowed the *Saadoos* with the rest. I understood. *May all beings be happy!*

If I experienced headache or stiffness in my neck, as soon as I gave it some focused attention, it went away. My lifelong post-nasal-drip sinus problems were not bothering me. My allergy related cough reared its scratchy head almost every meditation, but the room was nevertheless amazingly still. Each time it felt more still.

Compared to my pre-course panic, the thoughts that came during breaks contained no negativity, demons, nor work, my main addiction. They centered on love for family, nice things

I could've said and still might. To my husband Larry: gratefulness for the good and god he is to others and me. To Larry's mother: how difficult for her to have helped her husband live since his stroke at fifty-seven, and now how horrible that he is feeble, frail and fading at eighty-seven, that she has to help him die. My own mother: I wished to forgive the negativity that life circumstances had engrained in her voice and manner. I *almost* found those words. For my children, granddaughter, and friends: sweetness. I accepted them completely and wished them happiness.

On breaks I noticed that the music my unconscious pulled to surface was positive: Keb Mo's *Getting Closer* and Sting's *The Russians Love their Children Too*. I found myself spelling L-O-V-E with raisins on my toast. I wrote P-E-A-C-E in pinecones and the next day someone had added S-E-R-E-N-I-T-Y. Although the evening discourses required focused concentration, they became fascinating. It was new to me, a writer/reporter and compulsive note-taker, not to capture anything, instead to merely let it soak in.

After the sixth day, the meditations did not become any less arduous, but time seemed to drop by more easily. I'd volunteered to clean the bathrooms twice, ever so slowly scrubbing cracks in tile with a toothbrush. I watered plants ignored by previous residents. One day I tried to remember every birthday celebration of my sixty-one years. I came up with almost two-thirds of them! With nothing to do and all needs met, I practiced meditation more, adding hours each day to the required sittings.

On the seventh day something changed. Sitting became almost unbearable to me. I used my cough to break concentration. Every part of my body ached. I looked for secret ways to move. I began to think that the old students here doing this again were crazy. That morning I'd resorted to my former practice of affirmative prayer telling myself the sitting would be easy and effortless. Wrong! Later that morning I lined up to kneel in front of the teacher and tell him of my discomfort. He said to smile at myself, move discreetly, let that go, and move on. Goenka's very next set of instructions focused on not getting disappointed in oneself and depressed about practice. What is, is. Accept that. *Appertura*. Merely observe. That night Goenka startled me with: "You have finished day seven, you have only two more days to work!"

What? Wow! Are they going to let us out early?

"After the morning meditation on the tenth day, we will let you talk. Since you can't meditate as well with talking, we will focus on *kamma*: actions one performs that can have an

effect on one's future. We'll also do a healing balm before you go, to soothe any wounds that may have opened."

### ***Day Ten: The Journey Back Home***

At first the tenth day seemed anti-climactic. In spite of adequate sleep, I was profoundly exhausted. My mind balked at another session of sensation and focus. Why would anyone ever choose to repeat this ordeal? Worn down, I never wanted to meditate again. I wanted to go home. To have my cell phone back. Did we really have to go to the hall 2:30 to 3:30 and 6:00-7:00? And what was this 4:45 a.m. lecture and chanting we had to go to? Would this be the final breakthrough I'd hoped for? How was I ever going to keep this up at home?

The 8-9 a.m. meditation seemed much the same. Service. Forgiveness. I'd heard it before. However, when that hour was over, just when my mind asked when the session would end, it did. Not midway. Not in advance. Simultaneous with. That was progress for type-A me. When we could finally leave the room and talk, Celeste and I hugged, wept, and shouted, "We did it!" We didn't realize we'd broken the no-touch rule still in effect.

I took a nap till just before afternoon meditation and found it *was* really different. Happy songs I couldn't understand but *got* somehow. No difficulty sitting. Not even a cough. Somehow when instructions focused on *being* the love, and *being* the compassion, not just seeing or feeling it, I *was* it. I felt different. My talk and walk had slowed. But anxieties returned about re-entry. Not, would I keep this up at home, but *how*?

### ***Epilogue: Six Weeks Later***

"Wow!"

"You did it?"

"I knew you would!"

"Mason made it through hell week, and Mom graduated Vipassana School!"

Even *I* was proud of myself. I wish they had set up that betting pool. When some of the uninitiated asked if they should/could do it, I responded, "It was an ordeal, not a retreat. Silence was easy. Sitting got to me. It was the most painstaking work I have ever done: physically, emotionally and spiritually. This is not for the faint of heart."

I stayed off alcohol, drugs and caffeine. Much of the frittering wasted energy of anxiety seems gone. I feel more centered and grounded. At 4 or 5 p.m., I allow myself to feel tired, instead of jamming through with caffeine till 7 or 8 before stopping to eat. I read or watch movies in the evening, my form of rest. My tai chi practice feels more balanced. I meditate every day, twice when I can; but not the recommended one hour morning and evening suggested by Goenka. I definitely have increased discipline to write. I've become less able to focus on more than one thing at a time. This is good.

Am I glad I undertook this training? Yes. I put it near the top of the list of many cosmic triggers in my life that have shifted me to new levels of consciousness.

May it last. May all beings be happy.

### *Post Epilogue: Six Months Later*

Life intervened. Wine with dinner some weekends. Caffeine in morning coffee, first half-strength, then full-tilt. Finding time to meditate, even for twenty minutes, became difficult. I let life block the discipline I said I wanted to develop. I faced a financial wall, an all too familiar place, and I began blaming everyone, husband first. Patterns from early childhood haunted me: inner fears of fraudulence, old ghosts that my life's work amounted to nothing, feeling I was just going through the motions. These sabotaged my commitment to meditate. The three to five days I still meditate each week, I *am* able to remember the Vipassana technique, to focus on sensation, to melt. Those days I feel better and my blood pressure goes down.

So why don't I do it every day?

Stillness remains my final frontier. My therapist says I spend my time the way I spend money: I give it away too freely. I need to make both more sacred. To value them more. But thanks to meditation boot camp, I have a tool with which I can carve the discipline, and shift my experience of time into that slower lifestyle I desire. Perhaps I'll go again.

Did I just say that?

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