



# 11 days of my life for *Vipassana*

## – No Vacation This!



The day finally arrived after a wait of around 6 months. I woke up at 3:30 AM to wind up a few pending office mails and open items (as such I was awake, just lying down). I cautioned myself - This is when I would wake up for the next 11 days. I managed winding up the pending tasks and read the Astro forecast for today - "Enjoy a strong sense of freedom in which you are ready to break free on your own. Emotionally you seem to be on a path that inextricably leads to solitude and suffering." And I was left wondering whether solitude compounded with suffering would be far tougher than my current tough life. From whatever I'd heard and read about Vipassana, it seemed a really hard task. Vipassana did not seem like a good bargain and by now I was sure this was going to be no vacation.

It was on one of the usual and edgy days, around 6 months back that I picked up this new word 'Vipassana' - from an acquaintance. I remember I noticed a refreshing calmness written all over his face and I'd enquired matter-of-factly about the transformation. After some initial hesitation he'd confided that it was perhaps the result of a meditation course that he'd taken a few months back. The conversation ended there. Some 3 months back, a close friend called me up and informed me that he's planning to apply for this course scheduled around mid-December. I offered him company, though I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into. From reviews, I did know it was considered very challenging, perhaps amongst the most challenging forms of meditation retreat available. I was not exactly going through a great phase in life and anything else seemed to be better than my current mode of life. Plain and simple, I wanted to escape. I enrolled for the course online and the wait started. I thought to myself it'll be hard alright but will offer me a distinct change. Moreover I really had nothing to lose; the retreats are free of charge, and you're not bound to make any donations. Just 11 days of my life. *When Vipassana is really due, it will somehow reach you!*

### RULES

**During the retreats, you aren't allowed to communicate in any way, not even eye contact with other meditation students. A very minimalistic way of life is encouraged and you're are only allowed the basic necessities. As if that's not enough, you can't have anything to read, watch, listen to or write. Indubitably, cellphones and other electronic devices are prohibited. The rules have been designed to be strict without deviations. Seems they are essential and decisive to fully experience the meditation retreat. No instant form of gratification.**

There are countless memories, myriad sensations and observations that I've from those 10 days of course. I could not pen down my thoughts during the course and can't recall many of them as I sit down to write this piece. Some of these, I am unsure how to cast them into words. Some of my friends wanted me to share my experiences, thus I've decided to give it a try. This is a summary of my experience during the period which I'd set aside for Vipassana. Rather, sort of.

Registration (Day 0) process was hassle free. I was allotted a small room with Spartan facilities. There was a bed which was nothing more than a slab of granite, there was a fan overhead and an electric bulb. But it all seemed like a luxury, given that many other inmates (I mean students) had to share accommodation in dormitories. The food was simple and vegetarian; no issues at all. In fact I realized later that food and meditation don't go well together. With no dinner it felt there were just two elements in my body - Fire and Air and starvation ensured that I was kept awake and mindful.

I am not planning to give you a day-day detailed account of the course. But to give a broad outline, the day started very early - around 3:30- 4:00 AM and ended around 9:30 PM. There is no way you could oversleep - ignoring the cacophony of numerous types of alarm bells, the gong's unmistakable crashing sound, rooster calls, mosque azans, temple music and other musical vibrations of the dawn. From there on till 9:30 PM, the day consisted of long stretches of meditation, silence and breaks in between. The course spread over 12 days (16th to 27th Dec). Day 0 (16th Dec) was reserved for registration and introduction. The next 10 days were all about meditation and self-discipline. On the last day (Day 11), you got freedom from the retreat (or should I say prison) but only after the mandatory couple of hours of early morning meditation!

For the first three days all we did was the AanaPaana practice - where you just observe breath and nothing else. In a way, life was simple and consisted only of meditating, besides sleeping, eating and cleaning, if you wished to. You had to keep your mind under control by observing your breath and sensations in and around nostril for the first couple of days. On the third day, the assigned task was to observe sensation in the area below the nostrils and above the upper lip. It sounds simple, but it proved to be much more onerous. I just could not focus for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Then my mind would wander away. It was so freedom loving. My brain seemed like an expansive tree (No Bodhi Tree this!) with multifarious branches and countless monkeys on each branch. Not a single monkey was idle.

There was no reading or writing allowed and this coupled with 'noble silence' was quite a monster to handle. On top of this the senses were really heightened. I was turning quite insightful and had developed a genuine curiosity for life around me. I was refusing to be bored with mundane things. The breeze of air felt it touched my skin deeper. The moon never seemed more beautiful. The stars appeared far more exciting than just a speck in the sky. The food seemed tastier. The flowers, birds and butterflies appeared more colourful. I especially was fascinated by the birds around. (Birds observed during the period - Indian Grey Hornbills (What a surprise), Parrots, Mynahs, Wagtail, Bee-eater, Red vented Bulbuls, Hoopoe, Robins, Shikras, Hawks, Bats and Owl et al). I observed the wild flora keenly (All wild flowers in the campus had five petals!). I was observing anything possible, keenly. (The window in my room had a 10X10 bar grid, which helped me keep a count of the days)

My batch consisted of around 80 men and women. There was complete segregation of the genders and only time you noticed the other gender was in the meditation hall, where we are not supposed to move and keep our eyes totally closed. Remember eye contact is not allowed during the practice. We had to lead a life of total renunciation - like how a monk or a nun leads her life, luckily for a limited duration 10 days. It meant abstinence from desires, practicing restraint and "noble silence" - total silence of voice and thoughts.

Real Vipassana effectively started on fourth day and ahead. The first three days had gone in preparation for the next seven days of intense rigour. Vipassana (Pali form of the original Sanskrit word- Vipaśyanā) means to see things as they really are. In the Buddhist tradition it means insight into the true nature of reality, namely the three marks of existence: impermanence, suffering or dissatisfaction, and the realization of non-self. It is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was rediscovered by Gautama Buddha more than 2500 years ago and was taught by him as a universal remedy for universal ills.



The Vipassana technique proved to be quite simple. It involved doing a body scan to observe sensations all over the body (from top of the head to the toes, back to head and all over again). To start with, I kept my mind moving my mind from top to toe and back without any real sensations. Gradually I started feeling subtle sensations all over. The instruction was to observe the sensations objectively, without labeling them as good or bad; without craving for any particular type of sensation or having any aversions for other forms. With my limited understanding, I figured out that if you wanted to tread the path of meditation you had to do it by balancing two things in life and mind: Awareness of Self and Equanimity in Mind. During my sittings I used the following words as tools to tame my mind.

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**Patience, Persistence, Strong Determination & Discipline – (Athithana)  
No craving, No Aversion, No Comparison, - Equanimity  
No Past, No Future, Stay in Present – Breath (Awareness of present) & Be Happy  
No I, No Me, No Mine, No Ego – Impermanence (Anicca)**

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All through the course span, there was Goenka Ji's voice guiding us. The meditation sessions also started and ended with his voice (instructions and chanting). Besides there were "Discourses" towards the end of the day, which are the pre-recorded videos. Goenka Ji was a good story teller with nice earthy anecdotes and stories. Good rustic sense of humour with mass appeal. Mr. Goenka, a Burmese man of Indian descent who one might say reintroduced Vipassana to the world in the 1970s, opened the first centers. By day four, I'd formed a mental image of how things were running and I'd also gathered a little determination with the discipline induced from sitting at one place. On the 7th day of the course, started the Atithana sessions - sittings of strong determination. 3 times a day there were hour-long sits of "strong determination" as the Vipassana meditation calls it. You cannot move or open your hands, eyes, or legs. You are in the same position for the entire agonizing hour. In this position of immovability, physical pain is bound to wage a war against you. Owing to my sedentary workstyle I already have issues with my back and neck. My knees, lower back, hips, shoulders, neck, thighs, ankles and a majority of every body part were sore with strain. There were moments of weakness and self-doubt. I'd look to my right and then left, and forwards and turn backward, only to find that except a very few most of the students were frozen in their position like a statue; no detectable movement at all (I found out later that for many of them, it was an annual affair. Some of them had taken the course more than 10 times and had been practicing Vipassana for years. So I did not fare all that badly). My mind kept playing games and induced a lot of self-pity. But once I could sit through an hour, I knew I could do it. It's all there in the mind as they say. If you could stop making mental pain out of the physical pain, it became much easier.

I could sit cross-legged for one hour at a stretch. I could stay silent for 10 days. Vipassana mandated 'noble silence', which means that you could not even have eye contact with other meditators, forget speaking to them. It was tougher than I thought. Silence means just talking to yourself and even strive to avoid that. It meant not thinking anything; total blank. I feel, this is one thing, which really helped me achieve the seemingly impossible goal of completing the course. Discipline & Determination are the two gems which can make our lives easier.

Shunning things like mobile phone, media, mails, WhatsApp meant a complete digital-detox. This possibly has helped me improve my attention span. I don't get a severe craving to check for mails, messages now. This also ensured that I got some time for myself and in the real sense with myself. A little 'looking into your own self' does really help.

Even before I returned to outside world (or real life as I prefer to call it), that moment when the sanction of 'noble silence' was lifted and we could talk normally again with the other students, I felt a chaotic eruption, an unrest forming within myself. 10 days of silence and meditation had made me get used to solitude and discipline. In a way, I'd started liking this form of 'ideal' life. Once 'noble-silence' was broken on the 10th days, it became very tough for everyone to focus. There is nothing like a noble chatter.

In my mind, I could broadly split the course into two parts – The Technique associated with the meditation and the Theory (Gyaan) around it. There are many concepts around Vipassana way of life (the Buddhist way), I did not agree or I could not understand. I had turned a little skeptical about a few things. Nirvana (Enlightenment) is the dangling-carrot that Buddhism promises. I'm not sure whether I need Nirvana. My requirement is simple happiness. I want to lead a happy life. Nirvana is not a substance I aspire, at least not as yet. I finally decided to keep cynicism aside (as I've been normally doing in life) and accept the concepts which I sense are relevant to me and the things I liked. I've been served a dish with few ingredients which I don't savour. I will discard them and enjoy the majority rest of it. I can focus on the technique rather than the covering 'fuzzy' logic and concepts around it. Finally what will help me is everyday practice, not the intellectual layer surrounding it. I aspire to slowly transform myself into a better and stronger person, with practice. No shortcuts.

It'd be a word of evasion to say that it was all smooth. There were tough and frustrating days; I was very agitated on Day 4 and Day 7, in particular. I kept feeling really miserable, had started doubting everything - the intent, my determination, the purpose and everything else. All throughout had multiple rounds of craving of freedom; kept counting the days left for this course to get over. When the last day (Day 10) did arrive, it did not feel anything special. I was tired and probably could not gather any excitement. Also, I was a little apprehensive about how it will be outside, once the course got over. I'd been keeping largely uneasy over the last few months and likely that a little more so in anticipation of this course. Now that I've completed this course, it feels a relief the 'meditation' checkbox has been ticked. Also, staying away from my family in this really-really-disconnected state made me realize their worth even more. I sense they also got some respite from me and my eccentricities. And I'm made to believe they also missed me a bit.

I'm glad I did the course irrespective of whether I totally agree with few of the concepts of Buddhism around which the course has been constructed. I'm also relieved I did not leave it halfway. Regardless of where my journey of life takes me, hopefully now I'm more ready to accept life, as it comes.

