

# Dhamma or Dharma?

A qualitative study of two  
meditation retreats in different  
Buddhist traditions



## Dhamma or Dharma: A qualitative study of two meditation retreats in different Buddhist traditions

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### Abstract

This paper is a comparative study of two 10-day residential meditation retreats in the Theravada (Goenka) and Mahayana (Tibetan) tradition. The qualitative study relied on the participant-observer, ethnographic method where the researcher is himself a participant and observer in the life of the sub-group being studied, in this case the meditation retreats. The overall purpose of the paper is to give a very brief introductory exposure to two important traditions in Buddhist thought as demonstrated through the meditation retreats. It is not the intention of this paper or the author to create a schism in the sangha by proposing the 'best' tradition but rather to attempt to give a nuanced understanding of the two traditions and help one choose wisely between the two meditation retreats, based on one's temperament and the suitability of the retreats.

In the current globalized state of the world, it is increasingly the case that one's identity is not entirely pre-determined by conventional categories such as caste, gender and ethnicity but instead there is freedom of choice and nowhere is this felt more than in one's relationship with religion. According to Nelson (2010) for the first time large numbers of people in the world are free to choose their religion and by extrapolation this also applies to the various traditions of contemporary Buddhism that are available such as Zen, Theravada, Vajrayana, Pure Land, etc. Before one decides on the particular tradition that one resonates with, most newcomers are thus 'Experimental Buddhists' and this paper is written with a view to helping such people choose between two specific traditions.

In the paper through the use of a table, various aspects of the two meditation retreats are compared and contrasted such as the daily regimen, food and living arrangements, rules of conduct and discipline and the religious component.

In conclusion, it is the opinion of the author, which is of course entirely subjective, that each type of meditation retreat has its benefits and the participant would do well to suitably combine aspects from each tradition and create for herself an optimally customized Buddhist path which is an admixture of dhamma and dharma.

As a caveat it must be kept in mind that the data provided in the paper is very limited and the author of the paper is a beginner and has not explored all the aspects of each tradition, so the conclusions made are necessarily tentative. Further research will be required before any authoritative comparisons can be made between the traditions.

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### Aim of the paper

In this paper I describe as simply as possible, my personal experience, while attending two different meditation retreats in India in the month of October 2014, in two different Buddhist traditions. The residential retreats were both of 10 days' duration and were conducted in the same city, with a gap of 3 days between them. Through this paper I hope the reader is able to discern the nuances of the different Buddhist traditions as practised in these particular retreats and is then led to optimally explore the Buddha's teachings, keeping in mind one's temperament. Helping one to choose wisely between the retreats is the overall goal of this paper and not to create another schism in the sangha. If there is even a whiff of the latter, it is entirely unintended and the result of my bad communication abilities, for which I apologize in advance.

### Profile

I consider myself to be an Experimental Buddhist<sup>2</sup>, exploring different traditions and picking and choosing those parts of each tradition that suit my temperament and beliefs. This may not be acceptable to purists who would rather that I commit to one particular tradition instead of picking and choosing from various traditions; however, I am already a pastiche of various influences in my life including but not limited to Eastern and Western education and lifestyle and have lived in India and abroad, and see no reason to adopt a puritanical approach when it comes to creating my own brand of Buddhism, one that suits my particular background and station in life. In this aspect I am taking the lead given by the eminent Buddhist scholar and practitioner Joseph Goldstein:

“The different teachings that are coming together and interacting here in the West are being tested and challenged by each other. We're hearing different teachings, we're reflecting on them, and we're practicing them and testing them in our own lives, in our own meditation experience. Many of us are practicing in several of these different traditions. It's not uncommon for people to list as their various teachers Tibetan Rinpoches, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese Zen masters, Thai ajaans, Burmese sayadaws, and Western teachers of every school. We may have various opinions about whether or not this mixing is a good idea, but it is what is happening. And so our challenge is to understand it and craft it in such a way that it becomes a vehicle for awakening.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past I have had some experience with one of these traditions (Vipassana) and slight exposure to another Buddhist tradition (Soka Gakkai – Nichiren) along with an academic diploma in a one-year part-time Buddhist Studies program from a university in India. Prior to this experiment my exposure to the Tibetan tradition was only limited to readings of the type, “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying”, popular Hollywood movies and books and video lectures of HH Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.

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<sup>2</sup> Nelson, J. “Experimental Buddhism: A new century calls for new approaches.” *Tricycle*, (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Goldstein, J. “One Dharma” *Tricycle*, (2001). Online. Available HTTP <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/one-dharma>

### Methodology and Caveat

I would like to re-iterate that this paper delineates my personal, subjective experience of the two retreats; nothing in this paper should be interpreted as an objective study of the comparative merits of the two traditions, if that were ever possible. Also, it would be useful to not conflate the schools of thought and tradition with the meditation retreats arising from the traditions, although admittedly there is a correlation between them.

In technical language this study would count as a participant-observer, ethnographic method of qualitative research, wherein the researcher immerses himself into the subgroup that is under study just as an anthropologist would do while studying a tribe and endeavour to reduce interference and observer effect on the study.

Some of the specific components of each retreat can be conveniently compared and studied through the use of a table, as shown below, after which I give my impression of the actual content of the retreats and my understanding of the traditions through these retreats.

|                           | <b>Theravada</b>  | <b>Mahayana</b>  | <b>Comments</b>  |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>Tradition</b>          | Goenka Vipassana  | Gelug Tibetan  | Many types of Vipassana and many schools in the Tibetan tradition. |
| <b>Lineage</b>            | Burmese tradition; Sayagyi U Ba Khin is the principal teacher.  | Founded by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe; part of the FPMT   | FPMT = Foundation for The Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition   |
| <b>Presiding teachers</b> | Buddha himself although no pictures or idols of him or anyone else, anywhere.   | Je Tsongkhapa (14 <sup>th</sup> century), whose huge statue adorns the gompa (meditation hall) along with pictures of the above-mentioned two lamas and HH Dalai Lama.   |  |
| <b>Enrolment process</b>  | By enrolling on their website <sup>4</sup> 3-4 months in advance. No preference given to elderly or medically challenged. In the enrolment process detailed questions are asked regarding one's medical and mental history. | By enrolling on their website <sup>5</sup> around 6 months in advance. The earlier you enrol, the better your chances of getting a room with single or double occupancy with attached toilets and bathrooms. Also older people (> 50 yrs) and those with medical conditions are given preference for these (very limited) rooms. |  |

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dhamma.org/en/index>

<sup>5</sup> <http://tushita.info/>

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| <b>Cost</b>                                 | Entirely on donation. Nothing is charged, one gives voluntarily, or not.  | USD \$120 for a twin-sharing room with attached toilet and bathroom (10 days). There are various options but all are on payment basis. Nothing is free.   |   |
| <b>Number and geography of participants</b> | Around 50 male and 50 female; living arrangements, walking, eating and meditation spaces are segregated. Around 80% of the participants were from India.  | Total of 70 participants. Living arrangements for men and women are separate but walking, dining and meditation spaces are not segregated. Around 80% of the participants were from outside India.  | The average age of the participants was higher in the Vipassana retreat. The participants in the Tibetan retreat were mainly backpacking tourists visiting India. Important to note that some Vipassana meditation centres have a capacity of a few hundred male and female participants, while such large numbers are not common in the Tibetan tradition. |
| <b>Daily regimen</b>                        | Waking up at 4:00am and doing around 12 hours of meditation in 1 hour blocks with 5 minute breaks and a couple of longer breaks during the day. There is no lecturing/teaching, but a 1 hour video of S. N Goenka is played out every evening.  | Waking up at 6:00am and doing around 5 hours of meditation in 45 minute blocks with a few longer breaks during the day. Also there are around 3 hours of teaching/lecturing on the fundamentals of the Tibetan tradition.   | Although in both retreats the entire day is packed with activity, in the Vipassana retreat the main focus is on sitting meditation.   |
| <b>Rules of conduct</b>                     | Silence is scrupulously observed and even eye-contact and gesturing is discouraged. Structured times for interviews with the teacher are arranged during which one may ask questions pertaining to the Vipassana technique only. Philosophical discussion or argumentation is not encouraged. Mobile phones, laptops, all electronics and other valuables to be handed over at the beginning of | Although silence is supposed to be observed, in practice the instructors tend to be lenient. And during the teaching and lecture sessions, one can ask questions. And there is a discussion meeting with 5-6 other participants every day for an hour. Mobile phones, laptops, all electronics and other valuables to be handed over at the beginning of the course. Printed course material is provided to all |   |

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|                                     | the course. No reading, writing allowed. All such reading/writing material to be handed over at the beginning of the course.   | participants. Reading and writing is allowed and encouraged. One can also borrow books from the well-stocked library.  |   |
| <b>Food</b>                         | For first-time meditators breakfast is at 6:30am, followed by lunch at 11:00am and a light meal at 5:00pm. For experienced meditators there is no solid food after 12 noon. Food is essentially Indian sattvic vegetarian, with no garlic and onion and low on spices and chillies. Tea/lemon water available only during meal times. Hot ginger water available at all times. | Three proper meals catering to the predominantly western audience. Egg-Vegetarian with no onion and garlic and very low on spices and chillies. Most common food item was soup with or without vegetables. Freshly baked bread and peanut butter available at all meals. Tea/ginger-lemon water always available in the dining hall. | The idea seems to be to take one's mind off the gastronomic pleasures of eating delicious food and also reduce incidence of acidity, bloating and gas which would all be detrimental to long periods of meditation. |
| <b>Concessions while meditating</b> | Participants could use chairs and back-rests while meditating; however they were asked to try to avoid them initially and use them only if absolutely required, after getting permission.  | Participants were requested not to rest their backs on walls and chairs but this is not strictly enforced. Can freely use chairs and backrests - no permissions required.  | The traditional seated postures of meditation seem to be difficult to maintain for many and thus the need for these concessions.  |
| <b>Other exceptions</b>             | Participants are not allowed to smoke or bring anything into the meditation hall. No store in the campus that sold anything at all. One had to bring everything one needed for 10 days.  | Participants are allowed to smoke in designated areas and are allowed to bring tea and water in the meditation hall. A small store sold chocolate bars and candies along with essential needs like soaps, toilet paper and basic toiletries.   | In both the retreats on the very first day, before silence is imposed, one can ask the office staff for essentials like extra blankets or towels or basic toiletries.   |
| <b>Religious component</b>          | No rituals or prostrations performed but recorded chanting (of suttas) in Pali is played sometimes during the day. All religious beliefs welcome; no conversions taking place.   | Prostrations in the name of Manjushri before every teaching and meditation session. All religious beliefs welcome; no conversions taking place.  | In both traditions it is not mandatory for participants to perform the (very few) rituals of showing respect to the teacher(s).   |
| <b>Language of instruction</b>      | Regular taped discourse in Hindi and English. For those speaking other languages, there is the facility of translated instructions and video playback in separate rooms. Some words,   | English only. Some words, phrases and concepts from Sanskrit are used and explained.   |   |

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|                                   | phrases and concepts from Pali are used and explained.   |   |  |
| <b>Dress code</b>                 | Modest, covered clothing is expected. No tight or skin-revealing dresses/shorts allowed.   | Modest, covered clothing is expected. No tight or skin-revealing dresses/shorts allowed.  | During the yoga sessions the participants are allowed to wear comfortable clothing appropriate to the activity.  |
| <b>Restrictions</b>               | Participants are advised to not practise Reiki or any other type of meditation, other than Vipassana. Also, participants are advised to not do any type of exercises during the 10 days.   | No restrictions to practising other contemplative practises such as Reiki. There is a special 1 hour session every day devoted to stretching and yoga exercises (asanas).   |  |
| <b>Precepts</b>                   | The basic five precepts are compulsorily taken by all first-time participants and the eight precepts by experienced meditators.  | Towards the end of the course the participants had the option of taking the eight Mahayana precepts, but this is not mandatory. There was a formal ceremony where the eight precepts were taken for a single day, on a trial basis.   | The five precepts are: abstaining from lying, stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants that can cause heedlessness. The eight precepts include these five and additionally: no perfumes, garlands, music or entertainment; no solid food after noon and no high seats and beds. |
| <b>Other mandatory activities</b> | At some centres participants have to wash their own dishes after every meal. Of course one is supposed to attend all the sessions in the meditation hall. Cheap and efficient laundry facilities are provided and due to water shortages, participants are discouraged from washing their own clothes. | Every participant does 'karma yoga' for an average of 15 minutes per day which can include cleaning communal toilets, washing the communal dishes, stacking library books, etc. One is supposed to attend all the sessions in the meditation hall. Efficient laundry facilities are provided and due to water shortages, participants are discouraged from washing their own clothes. | Karma yoga is one of the limbs of the system of Yoga as mentioned in the Hindu scriptures.   |
| <b>After the 10-day retreat</b>   | On the last day the participants are allowed to  | A CD of the entire program is available on payment. A   |  |

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|  | break their silence and talk to each other, in this way preparing for the outer world into which they will soon re-enter. No email exchange, group photo or feedback is structured into the program. Books related to Vipassana are sold on the last day. | group photo is taken and circulated to all by email for tagging on Facebook. There is an open feedback session where participants can voice their concerns regarding any matter related to the 10-day program. |  |
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### Conclusion

An essential difference between the two retreats was that in the Vipassana retreat the emphasis was on learning a particular technique of meditation, while in the Tibetan retreat the emphasis was on getting an overall view about Tibetan Buddhist ideas and meditation was only one aspect of the daily program. In fact, over-philosophizing is discouraged in the Vipassana retreat and the presiding teacher makes it very clear that only questions regarding the specific technique of meditation will be entertained. In contrast, in the Tibetan retreat, questions of all varieties are entertained; complex Buddhist topics such as emptiness and karma are introduced and this naturally leads to further questions from the participants; very often these questions are not answered directly but external resources are shared. It must be kept in mind that a short 10-day introduction to the philosophy and practice of any particular tradition cannot do justice to the wide range and complexity of the ideas being discussed, most of which require sustained study and debate.

Another important difference originates from a fundamental distinction between the two sects - Theravada and Mahayana, and this relates to the motivation for being immersed in the Buddhist teachings. In Theravada, at least as demonstrated in the Goenka Vipassana retreats, the emphasis is on reducing one's suffering with the view that by purifying oneself, one is then in a better position to help others. A subtle difference perhaps, but in the Tibetan tradition the emphasis is on becoming a Bodhisattva who is in service of other sentient beings, although this should not be understood to imply that the Theravada tradition promotes selfishness.

Clearly these conclusions are tentative and provisional and the experimental Buddhist is encouraged to explore the different traditions for oneself and optimally combine different facets of each tradition to create a path suitable to one's temperament.

I conclude this paper with the sage advice of Bhikkhu Bodhi,

“The interrelationship of study and scholarship with practice is, I feel, a complex issue about which there is no single answer suitable for everyone. Some people will naturally gravitate towards one or another of these two poles. What can be said unequivocally is that scholarly knowledge without practical application is barren; vigorous meditation practice without the guiding light of clear conceptual understanding is futile.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “Translator for the Buddha: An interview with Bhikkhu Bodhi” *Inquiring Mind* (2006). Online Available HTTP <http://www.inquiringmind.com/Articles/Translator.html>