



## **My Vipashyana Experience**

I did my first Vipashyana Meditation course last month, at the Sayagi U Ba Khin Centre for Vipassana Meditation, by SN Goenka, in Dharamkot, Dharamsala. For the last 4 years, my husband Jagdish and I, have been going to Dharamsala in winter. He does either Vipashyana or the Tushita Meditation retreat (both places are side-by-side). I join him 10 or 12 days later, after he's had his fill of spirituality and asceticism. Bringing him down to earth, to the pleasures of flesh and food (there's deprivation of both in Vipashyana). We attend the Dharamsala International Film Festival (DIFF) held in the 1st week of November, and return home to Pune, refreshed and rested. Jagdish is an experienced meditator, having done 6 Vipashyana courses of 10 days each (plus one *Satipatthana*- 9 day meditation) and several 3 day weekend sessions.

This year, I decided to give it a try. He suggested the Borivali Centre in Bombay. It's a fancy one with a massive Burmese pagoda. Being new, and a favourite of page 3 and Bollywood types, it has clean toilets, mostly AC single occupancy rooms, and a buffet service comprising Continental, Vegan and *Satvic* vegetarian fare.

But I was afraid I would sneak into EsselWorld and WaterKingdom which are adjacent. In fact, one takes the same BEST ferry service to the island, then the road bifurcates. One leads you inwards, cruising on the roller coasters of your mind. The other takes you outwards, spending and gorging mindlessly. Vipashyana is a 10 day course, free of any charges, you may make a donation if you wish. Esselworld & WaterKingdom's combined day entry fee is Rs 1300 per person. Plus you will pay another 1500/- per person for food and refreshments.

Before I tell you about my experience, a little background on Vipashyana and some myths regarding it (that the practitioners themselves propagate) is necessary. Do note that this understanding on my part is thanks largely to my husband, who is a Buddhist scholar and shares his learning on his blog- [www.gurusoul.org](http://www.gurusoul.org). My description is peppered generously with my own prejudices and name calling - but the historical facts are true

### **Biggest Myth**

- It is a technique used by Buddha to attain enlightenment. It was unfortunately lost to India- where he developed/discovered it. But a few monks in Burma saved it by passing it on secretly from teacher to student

### **Reality**

- There is no mention of a *technique* of meditation called Vipassana or Vipashyana; instead the word Vipassana is used to mean insight either into yourself or on the object of meditation
- Buddhism in India was wiped out by Hinduism. As it does not believe in god, rites, rituals, superstition, miracles, it threatened the caste system, the priests' livelihood and everything Hinduism stood for. The rest was taken care of by the Mughal invaders
- Emperor Asoka was responsible for spreading it. He used the precepts and codes of Buddhism in his rule (post Kalinga). His surviving pillars, inscribed stones and edicts gave us the symbols of the Wheel of Dhamma (on our tricolour), the 4 Lions (our national emblem) etc. Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, the South East, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Sri Lanka still practises an orthodox form of Buddhism (Theravada) as do some parts of Burma and Thailand. Tibetan Buddhism is influenced by Bon- an older religion which was replete with demons and goddesses. Compared to Theravada- which is drab and threadbare, with no rituals, Tibetan Buddhism is vibrant and colourful, with fantastic symbolic ceremonies- the Kala Chakra for instance. Tibetan Buddhism involves paying obeisance to exquisitely painted, oriental style imagery of the various avatars of Buddha- Avalokiteshwara, Green Tara, White Tara... Tibetan monks play instruments, dance, twirl prayer wheels, count prayer beads and chant. And, not to mention they look really cute in their maroon and yellow outfits. This explains Tibetan Buddhism's popularity with Hollywood and western media. And the Dalai Lama promotes himself like a rock star. But this helps in focusing the world's attention to the Tibetan Independence movement (using Buddhism for political and social purposes- sort of like King Asoka)

· When the British invaded Burma, the senior monks feared conversion to Christianity and the demise of Buddhism, as had happened in India. They decided to teach their meditation techniques to lay people. But they had to do it quickly. In ancient times, one progressed in meditation gradually, over many years, sometimes, decades. The Burmese monks condensed it into a 21 day boot-camp technique, using the services and inputs of military personnel in this endeavour. This brought in elements of strict discipline, and **total obedience to the teacher**, in the meditation (Buddha would have laughed. He always said- Don't take what I teach at face value, question and figure out for yourself. Find your own path that works for you). Not surprisingly, questioning the technique, questioning the precepts, questioning why Mr Goenka sings *Satsang style Bhajans/ Bhaageet* at the end of every meditation session (jolting your hard earned peace out of you) will earn you the tag of troublemaker...

· SN Goenka was advised to try Vipashyana as a last resort for his painful migraines. All the doctors in the world had been unable to fix his hurting head. He was a Morphine addict when he did Vipashyana the first time. Apparently, people who have experimented with drugs, and creative people like artists, musicians, dancers are used to 'letting go', used to giving up 'control' and hurtling into either the abyss, or bliss. And precisely this quality makes it easier to get into deeper states of meditation, where one can experience visions, see lights and have a spiritual experience (body floating, feeling formless etc). Simply put, it is like getting high with your natural, internal chemicals- although that is not the purpose of meditation, it can be a side effect. So Goenka, a rich Marwari businessman in Burma, had an experience that Hinduism and modern science had been unable to give him. AND he got rid of his Migraine problem. He became a Buddhist, accepting the precepts and paths

· He used his influence and his money to make this learning accessible to all who could benefit from it. Thanks to his efforts, there are 50 Goenka Vipassna centres in India and all over the world. He further condensed the technique into a 10 day course, keeping the 20 day course only for advanced meditators. And he made it absolutely free

### **My experience**

I have known about Vipashyana since I was 12yrs old. My best friend Kaajal's mother was a Vipassi, and she has learnt under Fat Goenka himself. In the 70's and 80's Bombay, Vipashyana was the latest fad. Kaajal's mom and various aunts were into Vipashyana, Osho, Iyengar Yoga and what not. I was fascinated by their freedom to dabble in alternate religions and spiritualities. My mother, in comparison, was a '*Shubhangkaroti Kalyanam*', '*Gurur*

*Bhramha Gurur Vishnu'* type of mother. But the effect on Kaajal was very unlike me. She hated Vipashyana as it pulled her mother away from home for long periods, keeping the children under supervision of relatives. Only recently, at the age of 48, did Kaajal do her 1st and, as she says, her last, Vipashyana course. Just to understand the fascination it held for her mom... I have always known that I would be doing this- or some other form of meditation, at some point in my life. **Just not yet!** I felt that I hadn't experienced enough in life to want to meditate. I would smile every time Jagdish nudged me gently to try it. But after Kaajal did it, I felt it was time. I had heard the word 'Vipashyana' uttered for the first time by her, I learnt about it at her home. It was time to close the circle. Both of us had withstood the onslaught of our family members and friends doing Vipashyana and turning overnight into evangelists... it was time to take a dip and see if I come out disliking it, or liking it...

### **This is the Daily Schedule one has to follow**

On registering for the course, your mobile, wallet, books/newspapers, pens, pencils, papers are put away in a locker. On the form, you agree to stay on the premises for 10 days, to abstain from alcohol, cigarettes or any other stimulants, to celibacy and a vow of silence. At 7pm, you take an oath of Noble Silence. Men and women are segregated

- 4am- wake up bell
- 4.30-6.30 meditate
- 6.30-8am breakfast & bath
- 8am-9am (**Serious\***) **Group meditation**
- 9am-11 am meditation- with the option of asking questions to the teacher on technique and one's experiences (in whispers, no audible talking)
- 11am-1pm lunch (plus rest or walk around the campus to stretch legs)
- 1 pm - 2pm meditation + questions can continue
- 2pm- 3pm (**Serious**) **Group meditation**
- 3pm-5pm meditation
- 5pm- 6pm tea break

- 6pm-7pm (**Serious**) **Group meditation**
- 7pm-8.30 Goenka's video discourses
- 8.30pm-9.30pm meditation
- 9.30pm retire and lights out

There is one proper meal- Lunch. It is **4 courses- rice, dal, roti, sabzi**. You can take several helpings, but wastage is frowned upon. Pickle is available, but since it was Baba Ramdev's Patanjali brand, I did not touch it. Tea time is chai and rusks, or sheera/ upma/poha. I skipped breakfast from 2nd day onwards, opting to sleep as I was barely logging 2 hours at night. I gained an additional hour this way. I would've been satisfied with steaming chai and rusks at all 3 times. With the day temperatures at 8-9 degrees centigrade, all I wanted was to gulp hot liquids. I subsisted on 2 bowls of steaming dal, sometimes a sabzi. My natural tendency to eat less, was a boon, I soon realised. I did not suffer from bloating, gas or constipation. All day sitting on your butt is bad for digestion, and people who were gorging on the tasty vegetarian cuisine, were soon puncturing the meditation silence with stomach growls and farts! Typically one starts on day 1 by tittering every time someone let's it rip. By day 4, farting seems as natural as breathing (which it is) ·

### · **Days 1 & 2.**

Simple observation of one's breath. Breathing normally and focusing attention on the nostrils. This is called *Anapana*. No rhythmic breathing, no alternate nostril breathing- just normal, everyday breathing. It is quite tough because we all have a monkey mind! You have to gently pull it back and make it focus on your breath. As the day progresses, it gets easier to quell the mindless chatter inside. I started getting weird experiences by evening. At one point I got locked in the sitting pose- my hands seemed to be fused where the fingers interlocked and I could not separate them. I panicked as the session was over and I could hear people leaving for chai. I pried open my heavy eyes with great difficulty and was relieved that the spell broke. I had been sitting still for 2 hours, getting into deep concentration without realising- but I jumped the gun. As a result of my over enthusiasm on the first 2 days, on the 3rd day, my knees were so strained, I could barely sit for 15 minutes. I had no choice but to take it easy on the 3rd day.

### · **The 4th day**

The Vipashyana meditation technique is taught post lunch. It involves mentally scanning your entire body slowly from head to toe, and just observing any sensations you feel. The idea being that everything in this world is impermanent (*Anicca*) and so are bodily sensations. If you feel pain in any part, observe objectively without feeling hate, anger, panic or fear towards it, and it will slowly pass. If you feel a pleasurable sensation (men get erections, women get wet- but they will never tell you this!) observe without yearning or desire for more (This too shall pass). Typically, by the 4th day, all we city folks were battling knee pain, back pain and smokers had developed a bad cough (No OTC cold medications, only prescribed medicines for heart/pressure, diabetes etc, are allowed). 4 am temperatures hovered around 4 or 5 degrees and some people developed severe phlegmy colds. Thankfully there was a constant supply of hot ginger water

#### · **5th Day**

My coccyx (tailbone) started hurting. I have fractured it twice- at 17yrs and at 22. It's a blind spot now and I keep falling on it often. Sitting on my butt for long hours was bound to hurt. I took an extra butt cushion and observed my pain. It got less...hmmm. My earlier method of pain management was- **Grit your teeth and bear it, you sissy! What does not kill you makes you stronger...** Instead, I just acknowledged it, remembering how it had happened. At 17, taking off from the 10 metre diving platform, executing a somersault and aborting it half way, hitting the water with my feet parted. At 22, running around at work on high heels, skidding on water and landing on my butt

#### · **6th day**

My left shoulder started hurting. How could my posture cause pain in just one shoulder, shouldn't it be both, simultaneously and symmetrically? The pain was a surface pain- not a muscular or bone pain. I got up for lunch and the pain vanished. Must be psychological, I told myself. My body, so used to action, cannot handle this prolonged inactivity, and it is protesting with imaginary aches and pains. Later in the day, while bathing (we took afternoon baths), I looked in the shaving sized mirror and realised the shoulder pain was limited to my tattooed area. Whoa! The superficial pain was reminiscent of being tattooed! While getting tattooed, you experience pain as the needle scratches ink into the top skin layer; it does not penetrate muscle like an injection. So when the tattoo artist stops, your pain stops. I was reliving my tattoo pain whilst meditating. **And I got my first insight** - be it my coccyx injury or my tattoo, I did not allow myself to rest. I refused to acknowledge the pain. I stopped

diving temporarily but continued swimming extra laps and the tailbone healed in 2 month's time. I got a full back tattoo on a Sunday and went to work next morning. The tattoo took 12 hrs for colouring. Plus 6 hours (the previous day) for black ink outlining. I treated it like it was no big deal... For the first time in my life I applied balm to my pains. I had carried a tube of Moov ointment, and even though, away from the meditation cushion, I felt nothing, I still applied it. Feeling silly, but doing it nevertheless. **1st breakthrough: No tailbone or tattoo pain in subsequent meditation sessions**

#### · **7th day**

I made a mental list of all my injuries since childhood. Getting nervous on remembering that I've had a C section. A last minute emergency procedure done to save my daughter, Niharika. I can still remember the agony as they could not knock me out completely, I felt the knife and all the cutting and stitching at 50% or more. That evening as I entered the meditation hall, I experienced pain before I even laid my butt on the meditation cushion. A debilitating pain in my spine- the 3rd last digit in particular. The serious meditation session is called 'Addithana'- which means Strong Determination. You have to sit still and hold the pose for an hour- regardless of pain, itching or insect bites (it is quite sadistic). I wasn't going to last 5 minutes- forget 1 hour. I felt nauseous with the intense pain. Breathe! Just breathe! Observe, don't hate the pain, I implored myself. It will go away, it will! Or I will puke on the sweet lady sitting in front of me!!! I felt vomit travelling up my throat... and then, just like that, the pain vanished... At night I tried figuring why specifically the 3rd last digit of my spine was acting up. (No pain at all as I lay in bed). And what about the C section pain... and then I remembered- the epidural injection was given on the 3rd last digit ( It's been 21 years so I forgot these details). Apparently the epidural screws your back for the rest of your life. My mom had *tch tchd'* and said- "All your days of running around are over now. Your back is finished!" and I thought - No chance! I will not allow it...The gynaec advised 6 months rest, and gave me 2 sheets with some back strengthening exercises. They looked silly, like something geriatrics do in old age homes. So I threw those sheets and hit the swimming pool by month's end. What 6 months- I was good to go in 1. Yes, my back got stronger by swimming, but I never did acknowledge that it was not the same anymore...

#### · **8th, 9th & 10th Days**

Peaceful days of focused meditation. By now I knew what to expect and was confident of dealing with whatever happened. I caught a cold. With so much sneezing and coughing all

around, we were all literally inhaling and exhaling each other's germs. A few days earlier, I had actually asked for my neighbouring meditator's cold. She was suffering profusely. What's interesting is that I began the course hating her; I hated that her constant coughing, sniffing and sighing was hindering my focus. After the 5th day, I started feeling sorry... 'Take my health and give me your cold,' I thought... I got a minor dose. On the 10th day, by 10am, the course concluded with an affirmation session called 'Metta' and the oath of silence was lifted. The daily schedule of meditations continued, but now people could talk outside the meditation hall, the sexes could mingle and converse in the office area. But no touching- not even a hand shake. 11th day, we all departed after the 6.30 am breakfast.

### · **My lesson**

I have learnt that I do not acknowledge physical pain. I consider it a sign of weakness. In 2012, I was in a bike accident in Goa. My knee cap shifted by a few millimetres. I couldn't walk properly for a week, and could not bend my knee for 6 months. I did not visit a doctor, instead I got a friend (also a fitness expert) to slap it back into place (I saw stars!). Before the end of that year, when I could walk pain free, I ran a marathon. If I continue like this, one day I will just come apart... I have learnt that I'm just a bag of badly aligned bones. My pain is just a layer deep- it is present every moment. I don't feel it due to a plethora of visual, digital and mental stimulations that fill my every waking moment. I keep constantly busy with my designing and illustrating, not allowing myself rest. But peel away all the distraction and the first thing that surfaces is pain.

**And of course the genesis of this superwoman attitude lies in childhood- as all things do :-)**

My older sister was a sickly child- you name it and she would get afflicted by it. A mere mosquito bite could turn into an abscess on her. She had jaundice for 6 months. Her monthly period meant 5 days off from school and college. If we fought, she could cry herself into a fever by the time dad came home from work at night. My mother had had enough, so she would plead with me- "Bina, you be strong, you don't fall ill, you don't give me trouble, you don't keep me awake all night... YOU PLEASE MANAGE" And that is what I've been doing all my life- be it with physical pain (more obvious) and mental pain (not so obvious). I deny that I feel it. I suppress crying or acknowledging pain to the point of passing out.

So yeah, Vipashyana was quite an experience- in spite of Goenka's bhajans! I also got attacked by a monkey. Since all the Vipashyana centres are out of city limits, one is bound to cross paths with wild life- be it peacocks, deer or monkeys. Exercise extreme caution and don't always believe what the centre says- 'Animals don't attack unprovoked, they recognize and feel only love for meditators'. Wrong! Monkeys can attack unprovoked, like humans. I had weird dreams- but those are regular nightly occurrences. I missed having a diary to jot them down though. Every morning I mentally narrated my dreams, 3 times at least, to remember them till the 10th day. I forgot a few...

And just in case I have scared you into thinking it was all pain- it wasn't. There were some ecstatic moments too. The evening I overcame the epidural pain- that session concluded with fireworks literally. Half way through, I felt currents go up my spine in quick succession, and while I wondered what it was, sparklers started coming out from the base of my spine and spreading internally through my torso, and then lower into my legs. This went on for a while and I started feeling feverish. During the last 10 minutes of the serious meditation (Addithana) hour, I started spasming and shaking uncontrollably. It was happening internally, and since my eyes were closed, the effect was intensified. I felt like laughing. It was like an orgasm, sans sex...then Fat Goenka started singing and the session concluded. I tried to induce it next day- it did not oblige. Lesson learnt- don't crave. One day was a day of tickles and scratches- I hated it! I begged for pain as I can manage that better ... but one can't choose what one feels. One afternoon session, I got an image flash of my sister dangling our first pet cat outside our balcony and asking me, "Where's Attu's food?" Mentally I told her "It's there only, inside the cupboard," and was horrified to note that I had stuck my hand outside my shawl, pointing one finger straight ahead, Ambedkar- statue- style! I hastily pulled the offending hand inside and interlocked fingers again, eyes closed all the while. I experienced the sparklers/ fireworks that end in uncontrollable shaking, 3 days in a row. But not as intensely as the first time...

People go haywire on being released into civilization on the 11th day. Some smoke or drink immediately. Some have a meat-fiesta pizza. What did I do? I went to the chai shop next door and gorged on a bowl of Maggi with lots of green chillies and an egg dropped in, washing it down with sweet, elaichi chai!

I'm now back home in Pune and I have been meditating for more than a week. I think I will stick with it. It feels good...

Interested in doing a Vipashyana course? Register online here: [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org)