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Meditation vacation

By Matthew Green

Take New Year thoughts of health kicks and fresh starts a stage further with a 10-day 'Buddhist boot camp' in the Himalayas

The guru looked troubled. A spry 75-year-old, who could have passed for 60, he usually wore an expression as pure as his ivory robe. Peering into my cell, he watched as I wept harder than I could remember, for a reason my mind could not fathom. Then he beamed. "You are very lucky," he said. "This is a very big *sankara* leaving your body – perhaps it was an illness that even a doctor could not cure."

Perplexing as his words sounded, their meaning would become clear later. All I could grasp then was that the Indian meditation master believed that my mysterious meltdown had taken me a step closer to enlightenment.

The Himachal Vipassana Centre clings to the flank of a valley above the town of McLeod Ganj, in the foothills of the Himalayas in northern India, where exiled Tibetans, led by the Dalai Lama, co-exist with a backpackers' nirvana of hostels, trinket shops and bars.

Smiling monks sporting off-the-shoulder purple habits scurry past temples swathed in incense, while earnest-faced Europeans, Japanese and Israelis zigzag along paths of self-discovery. Late-night singalongs of Bob Marley classics with guitar-playing strangers are virtually compulsory; Vipassana is optional. Just as well: it is the closest thing on offer to a Buddhist boot camp.

The deal seems simple: you agree not to talk for 10 days, promise to invest 100 hours of arduous mental effort – starting each day at 4am – and forswear alcohol, email and mobiles. In return, you acquire a 2,500-year-old technique that, in theory, can end all suffering. There is no fee: you donate what you wish at the end. You just have to learn to sit still.

The promise appealed. Charging around Afghanistan with US Marines the previous summer, as well as brushes with suicide bombers in Helmand and Kabul, had left a residue of unease I could not shake. Then a painful break-up triggered a recurrence of the depression that had stalked me several times since my late teens.

I had felt the familiar grey fog gathering while on assignment in eastern Libya. Many will recognise the feeling: a force-field descends with the rest of the world on the other side. The glass is held firm by a false certainty that it can never be broken.

I had heard about Vipassana from a friend who had emerged uplifted from a course near Hereford in the UK. Over the years I had dabbled with meditation with the help of a shelf full of books, but I had been wary of the cult-like Vipassana regimen. Libya had taught me it was

time to try something new. After returning to Islamabad, I looked up the nearest school on the web.

The centre near McLeod Ganj looks like a low-security prison. Monkeys clatter over the roofs of dreary bunkhouses divided into individual cells. Beds are hard, the bedding grubby. Yet the location is stunning: snowfall gleams on a ridgeline visible through surrounding pines. Signs, embellished with petals and smiley faces, say: “You are bound to be successful” and “Be happy”.

I surveyed fellow inmates warily, envious of the profusion of loose-fitting clothing that is *de rigueur* on the backpacker trail. Almost all the participants at McLeod Ganj are on weeks-long tours of India but people from all walks of life attend more accessible centres in Europe and North America.

Not owning much meditation-friendly attire, I had haggled for four sets of stripy pyjamas in the market that morning, achieving a certain prisoner-chic. Solemn workers confiscated wallets and passports and explained the rules: no talking (or even eye contact), no writing or reading, no stealing, no lying, and no sex. The monkeys flouted this last commandment with enthusiasm.

I soon discovered I had a more pressing item to acquire than ancient wisdom: toilet paper. Unlike the savvier backpackers, I had not thought to bring any. To ask would seem like a flagrant violation of “Noble Silence”. As I dithered, an attendant pointed to a form. I wrote a request and a roll was delivered.

When night fell, the 50 or so participants sat cross-legged on cushions in the hall. I tried not to think about the Japanese girl sitting to my right, dark hair spilling down her enviably erect back. The guru pressed “play” on a tape deck and the room filled with a primordial vibration: the hum of a human didgeridoo. I bit my lip to stifle the kind of giggles I had not felt since school. Had this been a monumental blunder?

Vipassana means “to see things as they really are”. It is a Buddhist meditation technique popularised by SN Goenka, an Indian industrialist-turned-sage whose personality – and fondness for unearthly chanting – infuses what has grown into a global organisation.

With silver hair, heavy-lidded eyes, and a smooth line in Buddha-related jokes, Goenka is persuasive. Delivering lectures in a rich baritone, he elongates his vowels – so references to finding “real peace, real harmony” become “reeeeaaal peeeace, reeeaaal haaarmony”. Then he gives his trade-make sign: the gentlest of waves.

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Goenka stumbled upon Vipassana while searching for a cure for his migraines. When doctors failed, he rather reluctantly began a course in Burma, where his family was living. The pain melted and he eventually returned to India to pass on the technique. He has since trained numerous assistant teachers, including the guru who would later find me quaking in my room. Each evening, Goenka’s face looms from a screen broadcasting a series of prerecorded lectures



that guide us through the ordeal.

His instructions sound straightforward: all you have to do is sit still on the cushion and concentrate on the feel of breath flowing over your upper lip. After trying for a few seconds, it becomes painfully clear that the mind is determined to indulge its habit of endlessly rescripting the past or obsessing over the future – anything but focus on the present.

Routine makes days merge. A gong chimes in the predawn darkness, followed by a piercing ting-a-ling as an attendant rings a hand-bell – an eerie change from being roused by my (confiscated) BlackBerry. Tin cups of tepid herbal tea served during five-minute breaks become sensual highlights. Rice and lentils materialise at mealtimes, which, thanks to “Noble Silence”, are mercifully devoid of small talk.

Vipassana proper starts on the third day, when the challenge is to move the spotlight of attention from the lip to the top of the head, then scan the entire body. After 20 minutes, blades of pain stab the knees and iron rods prod the back. To my horror, Goenka informs us that we must perform this exercise for a full hour – without moving. Some have already quit. He reassures survivors that we are performing a “surgical operation on the mind”.

The masochism has a logic. By choosing to sit still in spite of the discomfort, you learn to observe sensations instead of reacting to them. The idea is to wean the mind from its compulsive addiction to judging everything as “good” or “bad”. It is this stream of mental commentary that fuels a sense of background-level disquiet that can easily balloon into anxiety, anger or, in my case, corrosive regret. The aches felt during the body scan are caused by your old stock of accumulated hurts – or *sankaras* – as they slowly evaporate.

Hocus pocus, perhaps, but as days go by, something remarkable happens. Sitting immobile for an hour becomes possible. The cushion is transformed from a torture instrument into a magic carpet – each sitting a journey through sensations I had never realised were there – a subtle symphony of tingling and warmth that ripples through the body in an ever-shifting kaleidoscope. Sessions were no longer struggles, but internal expeditions – scuba dives into the soul.

The earthquake struck near the end. Shortly after the start of the 11 o'clock sitting, I was swept by a tsunami of sadness. Yet even as my body trembled and the tears flowed, I was calm – it was as if the stillness had started to exorcise some forgotten pain, perhaps buried years before. I felt lighter.

The final morning was spent cleaning and I found myself scrubbing kitchen tiles with new-found zest. Though we had not spoken, fellow meditators seemed like old friends. It was as if kilos of stress had been stripped from my torso.

The next day was Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. McLeod Ganj crackled as boys hurled Catherine wheels and bangers. Rockets glittered overhead and I half expected to see a starburst momentarily trace a shimmering image of Goenka, waving.

Two months on, the afterglow lingers. I do not practise as much as I might, but I feel better. Vipassana unlocks a realisation that happiness is only partly dictated by what happens. Finding peace may have more to do with rediscovering a calm that is always there, but that life often

conspires to obscure. Next year, I'll be back in my pyjamas.

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Details

The Himachal Vipassana Centre (www.sikhara.dhamma.org) runs regular 10-day meditation courses. Accommodation, instruction and food are free; participants are asked to donate what they deem fit at the end. Courses also take place around the world, with 10 centres in North America, for example. See www.dhamma.org for details

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