

Embracing silence

In our increasingly noisy world, where silence is rare, the ancient Indian technique of Vipassana provides much-needed respite. Meena Azzollini reports.

IN 2011, the World Health Organisation concluded that noise is “a modern plague” which has adverse effects on health. The more we become attached to digital devices, the more we fill our minds and ears with noise. And it's not just physical noise that is the problem - parenting, personal and professional relationships, your job, and even housework all add to the 'noise' of mental chatter, which in turn causes frustration and mental and physical health imbalances.

The obvious answer is silence - but not the kind where you rip off your earphones or stop talking to people altogether. This kind of silence, known as Vipassana, is about observing life as it is - “seeing things as they really are”. Vipassana is an ancient Indian technique, revitalised by Gautama Buddha 2,500 years ago as a universal remedy for all illnesses. It has been passed down from teacher to student since the time of Buddha, arriving at the present-day teacher, Mr SN Goenka, an Indian by descent who learned Vipassana from the Myanmar monks who raised him. Since 1969, he has taught people from

many races and religions, making Vipassana a truly secular practice. Since then Vipassana has proliferated with the establishment of retreats and courses worldwide – all offered at no cost.

Meditation mastery

Vipassana is a means of self-transformation, mastered through meditation and observation of your breath, thoughts, and feelings in silence. The aim is to perceive sensations and responses of the body through disciplined attention, and to observe their interconnections with the mind and emerging emotions. By simply observing them - and not focusing on them or avoiding them - one can condition the mind to remain in the present and achieve mental clarity and peace.

The techniques of Vipassana are freely available to everyone via a 10-day residential retreat, with a strict regime of rising early, small meals and meditation session. You do not speak, make eye contact with others, read or listen to music, and there are no phones, computers, television, or radio. This is so that there are no distractions - the emphasis is solely on your inward journey and your observations, as you fix your attention on the natural reality of the ever-changing flow of breath and understanding bodily sensations, while learning not to act on them.

Jodi Ettenberg, author of *The Food Traveler's Handbook*, participated in a recent 10-day retreat in New Zealand. She explains, “After the first three days of focusing on breathing, we were introduced to Vipassana. This involved sequences of long body scans in a specific order. Throughout, we were instructed to be aware of the sensations or pain we feel. By not allowing ourselves to react to what our bodies felt, we were training our minds to build a barrier against blind reaction.” During the 10 days, participants also follow the five tenets of the Code of Discipline - abstain from killing, stealing, sexual

* Who are you?

Buddha identified two root causes of all suffering - desire and delusion - and by seeing yourself clearly for who you really are, through observation and eliminating attachment, you are accepting your true nature. This is a radical thought: that our happiness does not depend on manipulating the external world. When we rid our mind of all attachment, we gain Nibbana, the highest form of bliss or the eternal state of happiness.

Aside from participants reporting the benefits they have received from Vipassana, various studies indicate that

the practice of Vipassana meditation helps alleviate psychological and psychosomatic distress. It has also been scientifically proven that silence itself has many benefits - it stimulates brain growth, improves memory, relieves stress, fights insomnia, and awakens awareness. Vipassana meditation offers a complete mind-body-soul experience which enhances awareness of one's true being, while you gently release frustrations, worries, feelings, compulsions, and emotions, calming your mind with each session and emerging with profound peace and clarity by the end of it.

activity, speaking falsely, and intoxicants. All this is necessary to calm the mind so that it can be fully involved in self-observation.”

Lavanya Sankaran, participant of Vipassana and author of the novel *The Hope Factory* adds, “The instructions are straightforward: observe your breath for three days, then observe your body for seven.” After the three days of observing their breath, participants learn to calm their mind. By the fourth day they are ready to take up Vipassana meditation, which involves observing bodily sensations. Participants encounter many emotions, feelings, thoughts and memories. They may feel physical sensations, like pain in the legs, but they learn to understand the interaction between what happens in the mind and how that manifests in the body. They are asked to just observe: “When emotions are observed, not suppressed or amplified, they filter through quicker, leaving a smaller residue behind,” explains Sankaran. “Sensations rise and pass. Just observe, don't react - yes, this is challenging! But if one perseveres, it gets easier.” ✧

Vipassana meditation gives an insight into who we truly are, by cutting away all forms of attachment.

