

Jean-Claude See

Ten days of Vipassana Meditation

Jean-Claude See began to practise different types of meditation beginning in 1949 at the age of 20. Since then he has carried his investigations from France to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and the U.S.A. He has experimented with and practised quite a number of different techniques of meditation and self-knowledge, of Hindi, Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim (the sufi *Zikhr*) and even Christian (the Prayer of the Heart) origin. Furthermore, he has spend a year in the U.S., studying the most modern techniques of "personal growth" practised in California, in particular at Esalen: encounter groups, gestalt, bioenergy, etc. He says that just a few months ago, in India, he spent the most important days of his life, twice ten days of Vipassana meditation, under the direction of the meditation teacher Shri S. N. Goenka.)

The teaching of Vipassana meditation is, in India, open to all, men and women. It is done through camps of ten days, in which beginners meditate 11 hours a day, and more advanced students sometimes 24 out of 24. Board and lodgings are paid for by the donations of those who have already done at least one ten-day course. The course begins at 7 p.m. We are assembled in a large meditation hall, men and women separated into two groups, facing a low platform on which Goenka takes his seat. At his side is his wife, who will meditate without speaking a word for the ten days of the camp. In a deep bass voice, he begins by chanting the Pali the words of the Buddha, just as they were uttered 25 centuries ago in this ancient land of wisdom. Then he explains the Noble Eightfold Path, and the meaning of "Vipassana": insight, in which the awareness, focussed on the body, comes to know it in entirety. But to reach this stage, it is necessary first to concentrate one's awareness to a sufficient degree. This is the purpose of the exercise which Goenka then teaches us, and which is going to take up the first three days of our course: Anapana, Awareness of Respiration. This means observing the respiration at the entrance of the nostrils. "Aware, I breathe in; aware, I breathe out." This exercise, while very simple, is nevertheless the key to the first part of the Buddhist system of meditation: the development of Tranquillity (the second part being the development of Insight). Unlike what occurs in the method of Zen respiration, one should not try to change the respiration at all, but rather simply observe it as consciously and calmly as possible. Not to miss one inhalation, nor one exhalation. And little by little, in a completely natural way, even the most agitated and tormented mind will calm down. The respiration will become peaceful and tranquillity will establish itself.

Of course this concentration (samadhi) does not come so easily. It requires very strict rules of conduct (sila: morality) which Westerners practising the meditation often consider as extra elements, but which are absolutely indispensable for calming the vortex of the passions and the agitation of the mind.

During the ten days of Vipassana course, one is able to follow these rules very strictly:

- *not to kill (even an insect!);*
- *not to steal;*
- *not to tell lies;*
- *not to commit sexual misconduct (which, for the 10 days of the course, means complete celibacy, and later, not adultery or sexual fantasies);*
- *to abstain from all drugs or stimulants (including tobacco).*

Further, during the 10 days, we shall not be able to leave the premises of the meditation centre (situated at Igatpuri, three hours from Bombay, in a beautiful hilly countryside), and we must not talk (except to ask questions of Goenka), read, write, nor of course listen to radio or watch television.

On this first night of the course, we practise Anapana for a short time. Then at 9.30, we go to bed. At ten a gong vibrates in the night, all the lights of the dormitories and individual huts (where students stay after having done one course) are extinguished.

The Important thing is the development of awareness

At 4 o'clock the following morning, the gong wakes me up. After a cold shower, at 4.30 I am back in the meditation hall. Each person sits as he likes: the important thing is not the posture but the development of awareness. One soon find that the most comfortable posture, and the best for meditation, is the "lotus" position, in which the spinal column is very straight and without too much tension. One can also change position if one wishes to, but always trying not to lose the thread of awareness. At about 6 o'clock, Goenka arrives in the meditation hall, and his very beautiful chanting in Pali comforts the new students, who after an hour and a half begin to find the time a little long. . . and to have pains in the legs and back! At 6.30 milk tea and breakfast. And again at 8 o'clock, group meditation. We are about 100 people sitting eyes closed, young and old, Indians, Europeans, many young Americans, Australians, and even Buddhist monks in saffron robes from Thailand and Burma. One can begin Vipassana at any age, even without knowing anything about Buddhism, no matter what one's own religion. In fact this is not a religion but rather a technique which is so simple that the young Indian boy of ten seated among us can practise it as well as the old men with hair completely white, who could be his great-grandfather. Further, Indians often bring their entire families to practise Vipassana.

One cannot speak except to the teacher

Goenka gives instruction in English and Hindi. At 9 o'clock, he asks "old students" (those who have already done a course previously) to stay and meditate with him. The others can either remain or meditate wherever they please, for example seated on their beds or under a tree, or walking in the garden which surrounds the buildings. But it is recommended that we meditate more and

more often in a sitting position. In this technique, "continuity is the secret of success." This sentence will be the keyword of the instructions to meditators. At the beginning, it is very difficult to put it into practice. .

During the rest of the morning, the old students are called to sit with Goenka in groups of 2 or 3, or for the older students; individually, so that the Teacher may check how they are practising. At this time they may also ask questions and for a few minutes meditate with the Teacher, whose deep peacefulness seems to communicate itself to the student.

One must observe the respiration without modifying it

At 11 o'clock the gong sounds again. It is time for lunch (vegetarian, of course). For old students this is the last meal of the day. Until 1 p.m. rest and freetime (many use this time for laundry). From 1 to 2.30, individual meditation. Some prefer to go to the meditation hall; it is easier to meditate in a group. For though the practice is very simple, doing it is at first incredibly difficult. The mind, untamed like a wild animal seems incapable of being concentrated at the entrance of the nostrils. All kinds of thoughts and emotions disturb it. A continual interior gossip distracts it. Goenka makes a brief appearance in the hall to encourage the meditators: "Be aware. Develop your awareness. Be vigilant, Work for your own liberation: observe the breath! Simply observe, without interfering; don't create new tensions!" 3.30 to 5.00. This time the new students must stay to meditate with Goenka. He calls them up to him in groups of 4 or 5: "How is your awareness? Does your mind wander much? Does it return quickly or slowly to the sensation of the breath? After one or two minutes? Five or ten minutes? Half an hour?" In the last case, he recommends that one breathe intentionally, exaggerating the breath all the time, making a slight noise with the air.

The awareness must be concentrated at the entrance of the nostrils

It is very difficult for me to remain in one posture. I change position almost every ten minutes. Much pain in the right knee (rheumatism!). It is hard for me to concentrate my awareness at the base of the nose. At some moments, I experience the sensation of the cool air inhaled, the warm air exhaled, and also the pulse of the blood in my nostrils. At other times I have the impression of penetrating much more deeply the half-inch square at the base of my nose. My awareness becomes sharp and fine as a hair, and this minuscule piece of flesh seems to me an immense space where the living particles (blood cells? molecules? atoms?) perform an astonishing dance. Who would believe, without having experienced it himself, that the awareness could become so fine? 5 p.m. Milk tea and fruit for new students. Black tea or lemon water for the old. Then rest until 6 p.m. But the old students continue to maintain their awareness all the time, even outside of formal meditation periods, while walking, eating, and even sleeping, for with training one becomes conscious even in one's sleep, and one dreams knowing what one dreams!

6 to 7 p.m. Group meditation. The small area of half an inch square beneath

my nose seems as vast as the ocean; the pulsation of the blood raises the skin like waves, the very gentle movement of the breath, having become almost imperceptible (as concentration increases, the breathing automatically becomes more and more subtle and shallow), seems like a gentle breeze, passing over the hairs of my moustache, caressing the skin. 7 to 9.15. Discourse. Goenka gives theoretical explanations of what we have practised all day. So it will be every evening, the schedule for other days being no different. Impossible to give in a few words a synopsis of this discourse of one and a quarter hours. However here are the major themes: We have come here looking for peace, happiness, and by the end of this first day we have pain everywhere! We were hoping for higher states of consciousness, and we have got . . . aches and cramps! In fact, this physical pain appears in opposition to the mind which begins to be purified. One must face this reality, this truth of our body, here and now, without reacting. Develop equanimity.

Observe the sensation of the air inside the nostrils

At the end of the second evening, the instructions for new students are modified a little: they must try to observe the sensation of the air not only at the entrance of the nostrils, but also on their inner walls. 8.15 to 9 - last group meditation. 10 p.m. - lights out.

Meditation is a method of purification

With time, concentration improves, become more and more precise and subtle (but of course there are difficult times when it seems to become impossible). New instructions on the third evening: stop observing the breath itself, instead give all your attention to the sensations in the same area as before. For new students, the entrance of the nostrils, the base and internal passages of the nose. For old students, only the area the size of a fingertip at the base of the nose (new students will not do this until the following day).

The physical pains increase, but when I am really concentrated on the sensation at the base of the nose, I forget almost completely the pain (especially that in my right knee), which otherwise would be unbearable. In this way the meditation becomes a process of purification: all the impressions of the past, the after-traces of actions good or bad, in a word *karma*, rise to the surface of the consciousness in the form of sensations; all the impurities accumulated for such a long time (since birth or - if one believes the Buddhists - during millions of earlier existences) can thus be "purged", on the condition that I observe their manifestation without reacting, with equanimity. In ordinary life, it is precisely this blind reaction to impulses conditioned by my past habits which forces my enslavement to this endless chain of cause and effect; now, however, the past *karma* evaporates leaving no trace. This is the astonishing power of the technique: by the close of the fourth evening it seems deeply moving to me to feel my mind so clear and peaceful, having been able so rapidly to clarify it and clean it of impurities accumulated for such a long time. It is true that the term "to burn" the impurities is no metaphor. At certain moments I truly feel my body as if it is on fire. "Very good," Goenka

encourages me, "these are the traces of past anger, of greed, which are thus burnt up. Continue, burn all night. You have much to burn!"

The awareness: from the top of the head to the tips of the toes

The next day, from 3 to 5 p.m., Goenka now gives instructions for Vipassana itself: the awareness, concentrated to a sufficient degree (samadhi) can now be directed first to the top of the head, then moved progressively throughout the body, to the tips of the toes. Little by little, the entire body will be penetrated by awareness - and become incredibly alive. I shall be able to feel in detail, within my own body, my thoughts, my feelings, the impermanence of all things, and to detach myself from the illusion of the "ego". Nothing is permanent but impermanence. No trace, no part of a self or a permanent "soul". But paradoxically, the more I am detached, the more my body seems to me alive and free the sensations vivid and intense, the vision of things incredible clear, the colours more vivid and brilliant. The sentence of William Blake comes to my mind: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, things would appear as they are, infinite." At certain moments the inner silence is total. Pure bliss. An incredible peace. The impression that my body is transparent. No limit, no prison,

Surely this will also change.

A new wave of impurities rises from the depths of my being, and again physical pain appears. The impurities are burnt away. But underlying the pain, a profound and intense joy accompanies this purification.

On the last day, Goenka teaches *Metta bhavana*, the "sharing of merits", in which one silently lets emanate the vibrations of peace and joy which one has been able to taste, in order to share this peace with all sentient beings, friends or "enemies".

*"May all beings be happy
May all beings be free
May all being find liberation."*

I can no longer say "I" but rather "this" emanates love, compassion, harmony, infinite love for all beings. "May all beings find Real Happiness."

10 a.m. We again have the right to speak. When we part, it is with a completely new outlook that we return to daily life.

A master of Vipassans Meditation: Goenka - Burmese of Indian descent, about 55 years old, head of a family and s businessman, Goenka is one of the rare vehicles for a tradition unbroken since the Buddha and transmitted very strictly for 25 centuries, from master to a small number of disciples chosen very carefully in each generation. This technique has been accessible to Westerners only recently. Goenka teaches in India - homeland of the Buddha, but his doctrine began to decline there 80 years before Christ, and totally disappeared following the persecution by Islam in the 12th century of our era. He has thus brought back to India a technique jealously and strictly preserved in Burma, where Goenka lived from infancy.