

BUILDING GREEN

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BREATHING SILENCE

Learning to Sit Down & Shut Up

BREATHING SPACE

A skeptical motormouth with chronic back pain learns to sit down, shut up and let it be.

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN

Six twenty-four a.m. Ten days at a silent retreat? What the hell was I thinking? Taped chanting sounds like Neil Young gone Bollywood. He's moaning in the ancient language of Pali—a train wreck of consonants and misplaced vowels. Surely this can't be the intended tempo? The batteries must be dying. I shift position. Again. Shouldn't be looking at my watch. Can't stand it. Six twenty-freaking-eight. Tape hissing, almost stopping, and then, oh... please, no... he's starting up again. It's like a cheesy John Wayne death scene. This time let him die! But no, another staggering hesitation and on the nasally chant goes, and goes, and goes...

It's over. Breakfast. Six thirty-five a.m. Apparently 11 minutes of chanting can feel like an eternity after two hours of meditation. I really hope they get to that peace and compassion stuff soon.

Three very long days ago, on a crisp November afternoon, my girlfriend Carol and I pulled into the Merritt Vipassana Centre. Simple. We would learn how to meditate by shutting up for 10 days. This, according to everything I read, would make the osteoarthritis in my back disappear and make me as flexible as Gummy. I would become calm and focused and very wise. Altogether, an excellent plan considering that in more than 40 years on the planet I haven't sat quietly for more than 20 minutes at a time. On the drive to Merritt, we talked nonstop.

That afternoon at registration, the heavy curtain hadn't yet been pulled down the middle of the dining room and the genders mingled freely. Conversation buzzed in the chamomile-scented air. The 25 men and 25 women ranged in ages from their early 20s to well into their 60s. No one looked too weird. The people checking us in seemed fairly normal. Regular names were in use. I heard no one asking for any Moonbeams or Starseekers. I took this as a fortuitous sign. No one wanted my Visa number, which was even better. Pay what you want at the end, they said. Not exactly one of the more astute business plans I'd seen, but I liked that no one promised me instant Nirvana for five thousand bucks.

Carol was assigned to a small, simple room with a single bed, nightstand and bedside mat. Very nun-like. I felt her pending enlightenment.

Vipassana is a nonprofit society with retreat centres worldwide. Courses run every month at the Merritt facility, which is about a three-hour drive from Vancouver. See www.dhamma.org.

Then it was my turn. The woman registering me looked at my almost six-foot height and said, "You might want to go make sure it's comfortable, because you're on a bottom bunk in one of the group rooms." I found the room down the clean, shiny hallway of the women's dorm. Two other bunks already had gear on them. The one nightstand looked like a homeopathic general store. It had that health food store vitamin-stink of things that must be good for you. The other woman obviously thought we'd need to change outfits a lot.

I plopped onto the bed, pushed up my glasses and automatically checked if I had enough headroom to be able to sit up and read or write. As I looked for the nonexistent bedside light, I remembered the reality of where I was. Right. I walked back to registration. "It's fine," I said.

Solitary confinement

I'm going crazy. No doubt about it. Obviously sleep deprivation and no protein is part of their plan to weaken me into some Kool-Aid drinking fool. I can't even go for a long walk at the lunch break. They've got us in a little gravel yard surrounded by pokey interior pines. There is to be no running or walking outside of the gate. What exactly are the 85 acres for? I walk as fast as I can in circles, lapping the slow meditative walkers. I want to push them all down. Don't these people exercise? I feel like a hamster without its wheel.

No eye contact, no reading, no writing, no gesturing, no music, no proper walking and absolutely no speaking. It's increasingly clear how much time I normally spend doing all of the above. All I get to do here is... be. I can't run. I can't hide. All I can do is focus on my breathing from four—yes, dear god, four—in the morning until nine in the evening, when I crash into my bunk like a zombie from *Night of the Living Dead*.

Minutes take hours. My back feels worse than ever. I can't sit in the poses. I'm at the back of the room in a chair now with the other unfortunates like me. Pathetic. Hour after hour after hour after hour of trying to sit and not think. Vipassana meditation espouses no

mantras, no counting; in short, no tricks. One must focus only on the breath: the breath in and the breath out. Should be easy, but then so should brain surgery. Success is random at best. Thoughts loop and repeat endlessly like an old eight-track tape.

It's a funny thing about silence. Put 50 people in a contained space and get them to agree not to talk AT ALL for the next 10 days. Then tell them to try

When you let go of that rope it spontaneously releases, unkinking and unwinding, as it shudders and spasms on the floor. Meditation is that release.

and sit still in an unaccustomed position for an hour or two at a time—all day. Feed them nothing but tofu-fibre surprise and other bloodless fare. You could wish for silence forever, but it'll never happen. There is incessant rustling, shifting, bodily noises. The whoosh of the door opening as people leave for the bathroom, and the soft clunk of it closing upon their return.

There are breaks for vegetarian bulk of oatmeal, sunflower seeds and yogurt at our 6:30 a.m. breakfast. Of course, that's after being up since four and meditating for two hours without, I might add, the aid of anything resembling a cappuccino. The roughage continues with magnificently heaped bowls of salad, shredded beets and carrots and thick and stewy soups at the 11 a.m. lunch, and the "dinner" of fruit and herbal tea at five. I get creative when presenting myself with a banana, apple and orange—I drizzle my slices with the honey I sneak from the tea bar, and if I'm feeling particularly reckless, I dust it all up with cinnamon. I'm absolutely and constantly famished. It is especially at these meals that I want to yell, "Alrighty then, that was great... we've proved we can do it—now can we just let it go?"

No pain, no gain

For the first three days, movie-like visions spoo through my brain. Amazing close-up details of leaves in slow moving streams, intricate rock walls with dewy mosses illuminated by an Andean sun. The weirdest part is the morphing faces and images. The special effects are astonishing. How does

Marilyn Monroe's face become my dad's and then a Dalmatian's? Has my mispent youth finally caught up to me? This constant cinematography is surreal in its intensity and effect, but is very distracting from my goal of no-mind. Especially since I've never been to the Andes.

It's the fourth day. Now it's bad. I'm losing it. They're asking us to sit without moving at all—no bathroom escapes, no shifting—for one full hour at a time. Hour after hour of sitting, which creates bizarre physical sensations in my body. My lips twitch and flutter like Mumbles in a bad Dick Tracy cartoon. I try not to get up and run from the room, when what can only be described as grief seemingly pours from my shoulder. Then that same shoulder physically descends and releases from its former position. I didn't even realize it was tense and quite a bit higher than the other. Who knew? Sharp stabbing pains randomly attack my body until I'm quite sure I'm going to throw up... but... I sit... and, as instructed, dispassionately (ish) observe. My friends may call me ADD but I am capable of bouts of self-discipline.

New development: I'm crying, sobbing, the kind of weeping that is totally physical. I have no idea why. There is no thought or memory that brings it on. It just happens, overwhelms me and leaves me weak and hiccupping. This is a bad, bad idea. Why do I feel compelled to experience everything?

Jesus had a pretty good line, "This too shall pass." Each night, we are assured, via the videotaped visage of Mr. Goenka (the founder of this society), that these things are normal. "Think of your body as a rope, twisted between two hands," he says. "Everything that happens to you is registered on the body... and the rope twists tighter in reactive tension. When you let go of that rope it spontaneously releases, unkinking and unwinding, as it shudders and spasms on the floor. Meditation is that release." Yes, and that is certainly me on the floor.

the retreat comes to an end. It seems anticlimactic. We're allowed to talk, and talk we do. We're all very, very loud. It's overwhelming. I sneak outside to recapture the silence, the same silence I just spent 10 days fighting. I walk slowly, quietly crunching my way around the path, deeply inhaling the cold, pine-sapped air into my lungs. People pass me for a change.

And that's the wisdom of meditation, the knowledge that nothing is forever...

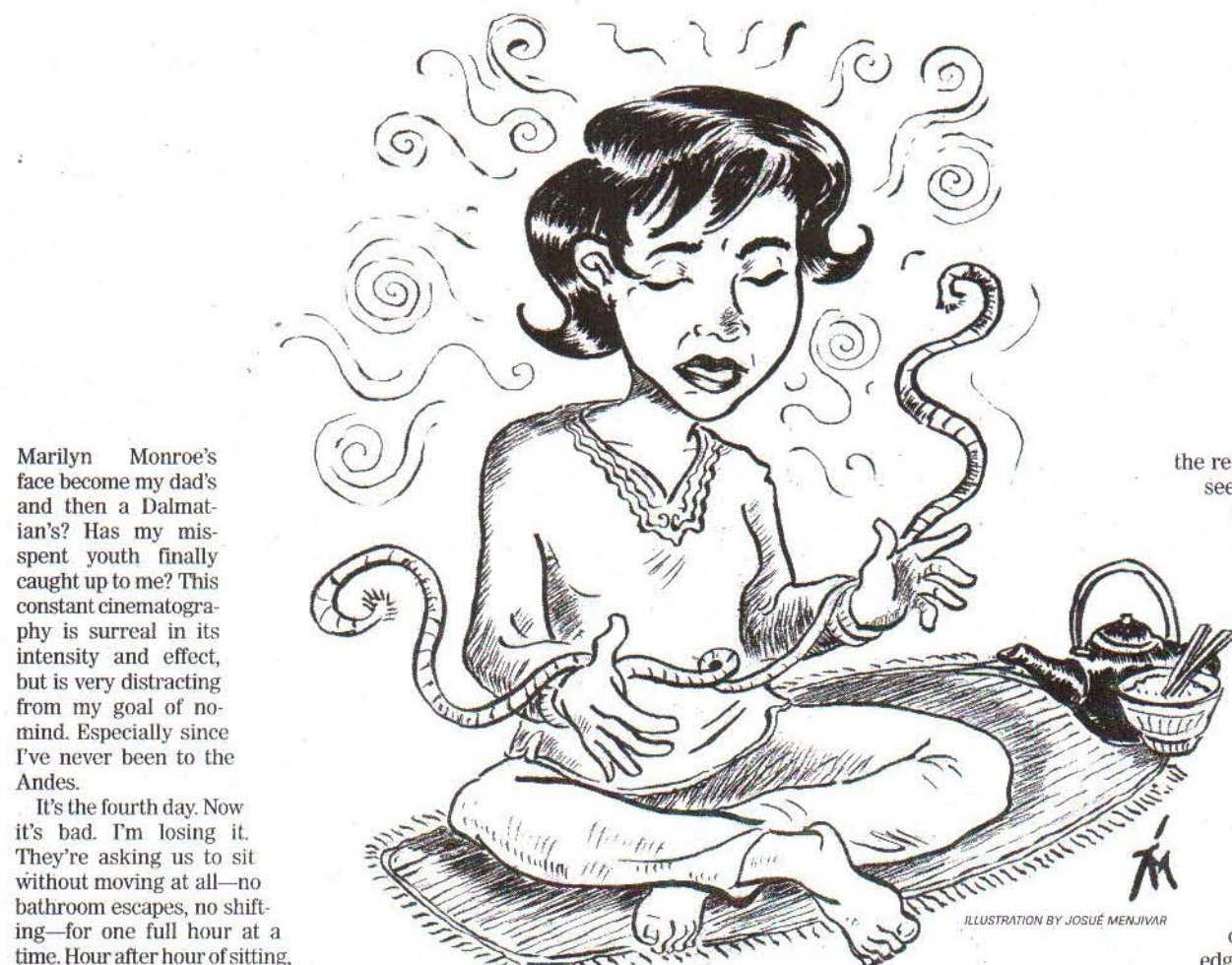
including pain. It's learning the art of not reacting—to step back and notice all sensation without any judgment of whether it's good or bad... it just is. Pleasure is not a reward and pain is not a punishment. It's simply the dual nature of reality. Goenka and Jesus were right. Everything is impermanent and everything is in a constant state of change. Naturally, I am now enlightened, equanimous, nonreactive and soon to be a saint.

What I actually am is someone who has found a source for renewal. Goenka's nightly video visitation helped me realize that this wasn't about self-improvement, but about connecting to my core self. I won't pretend that I enjoyed the experience. It feels more like an accomplishment than anything else, though lately I've been thinking about that 30-day retreat in India...

What I learned is that nothing is everything and everything is nothing. I recognize the centre is the swirling vortex of impermanence, and it is there that life seems to strike a balance. I learned that I'm better equipped to deal with whatever a day throws at me if I remain aware of my breath. I learned that life is to be found in the spaces created by sitting and stilling my mind. I learned that life isn't about doing, it's about being.

And, I can touch my toes. ✨

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Serenity now

By the eighth day I'm getting it. Glorious elastic moments where all I feel is incredible heat glowing through my body, right through to my usually frozen feet. Glimpses of deep peace and calm. Control, I actually have control over my infernal, internal and eternal chatter. The pinball has been grounded. I feel hyper-aware, and in spite of having my eyes shut when someone coughs, I "see" the coloured sparks and "feel" the sound waves rushing throughout my body. Goenka is right. Absolutely everything registers at every level of the consciousness. Now I notice pain, and like a storm at sea it gathers force, and then... it rolls on through. I can watch it leave. Bye, bye.

Before this epiphany, the back pain would grip me, inspiring intense fear. Fear that this was it, that this agony was going to be my life. The fear intensified the pain, and like a snake eating its tail, it created more fear. On the cycling devil would go until it would spiral into spasms that grabbed me, staggered me and froze my twisted muscles. Intellectually, I knew the cycle needed to be broken, but I seemed powerless to stop it. But now I'm learning how to kill that snake.

By the 10th day I'm on it. I see how these powers of detached observation could be applied to the outside world, beyond this immediate experience of my body. And in spite of every day feeling like it lasts 40,