

Sitting Very Still

I first heard about Vipassana meditation around five years ago. My friend had such a glint in his eye whilst telling me about his experience on a course that I decided I would try one myself if the opportunity ever arose. During my first summer here I had a bit of nenkyu to use up but didn't want to leave Japan as I hadn't exactly saved the millions of yen I thought I would during my first year as a JET. While I was thinking of something to do that conversation popped into my head. Five minutes and a couple of googles later and I'd decided to go to Kyoto to sit still for ten days.

I just want to write about my experiences on the three courses I've now done, so I'm going to leave the history to the Vipassana website. Have a look at www.dhamma.org if you want to find out more after reading this.

Having said that, here's a bit of history! Vipassana is a meditation technique which dates back over 2,500 years to the time of the Buddha, or Siddhattha Gotama as he was known to his mates. The Buddha taught a way of life called Dhamma. Obviously as with anything that happened such a long time ago these teaching have passed through time and been interpreted in their own way by the founders of each different sect of Buddhism we see today. However, usually the core principles of Dhamma remain regardless of sect. Vipassana adheres to the basic core of developing in Sila (morality), Samadhi (concentration) and Panna (wisdom). Although originating from the Buddha's teachings, Vipassana is non secretarian and practiced by people of all faiths. Anyway.....like I said, have a look at the website for more details.

The courses are pretty intense, they last for ten days and for each of those ten days you'll be meditating for around ten hours. A vow of silence is taken at the beginning of the course; this vow lasts for the first nine days. It only extends to talking with other students; obviously you can ask your teacher questions anytime. The vow of silence actually means avoiding all forms of communication with other students, even to the extent of not making eye contact. Before the start of the course you receive a list of these and other rules along with an extensive list of things you cannot bring to the centre. Basically nothing is allowed; no writing, reading, TV, music, ketais etc. Anything that might cause distraction to yourself or others is handed in before the course begins. The whole idea being that every bit of attention and awareness you possess is directed inwards.

If you're reading this and beginning to think that it all sounds a bit weird then I can't really argue with you. At the beginning of my first course, I remember entering the meditation hall for the first group sitting. In order to receive the teaching everybody is asked to make a formal request to the teacher which involves repeating a chant. Well.....as I sat there chanting in some bizarre, forgotten

language in a darkened room full of hippies I thought it was all a bit weird too.

To be honest though one of the best things about the courses I've been on is the diversity of people that I've met. Off the top of my head I've met; a ballet dancer, a lawyer, a UN official, a chef, a physiotherapist, a JPop singer, a Kung Fu teacher and yes obviously a few salary men, ALTs and hippies.

After making this request the course begins. The first three days are spent learning a technique of meditation called Anapana. This involves watching the breath. All your attention is focused on the touch of the breath as it comes in and out of the nostrils. Through this practice the mind should gradually become calmer and calmer. In reality, you sit there and think about the breath for three seconds until you suddenly realize that you're actually thinking about how nice tuna and mayonnaise onigiris are. Then you bring the attention back to the breath only to realize that it's wandered off to an episode of Baywatch. It's very difficult but simply due to the sheer number of hours you dedicate, combined with the absence of any distraction, after three days the mind begins to become more peaceful and focused.

Next is the method of Vipassana itself. This involves working with a meditation object more subtle than the breath. Next the attention is turned towards the sensations of the body. At first gross sensations such as heat, pain, pressure, the touch of your clothing on the skin and so on are observed. This may be difficult to understand for somebody who hasn't done a course but as your mind reaches a certain degree of stillness it is able to detect sensations which would normally be swallowed up by the mass of other input hitting our senses. With far less sights, sounds, smells and hopefully thoughts being processed by our mind, it becomes much easier to focus our mental energy on one thing in particular. In this case any sensation felt on the body.

By working in this way the mind can observe sensations of increasing subtlety as it becomes more and more focused itself. Going deeper into explaining this technique really isn't possible without simply doing it yourself but after several days of relentless meditation a stage is reached where one is experiencing a variety of sensations all round the body. Some of these sensations will be pleasant, some will be unpleasant and others will be neutral. The whole idea behind vipassana is to observe these sensations with equanimity. So if a sensation is painful, the idea is not to create aversion to it. If a sensation is pleasant the idea is not to create attachment to it. By keeping a balanced mind regardless of the experience one's equanimity begins to develop.

In order to develop further equanimity, after the fourth day of a course, meditators attempt sittings of strong determination. In these sittings, the aim is not to move any part of your body or open your eyes for an entire hour. This is done three times a day. Sitting crossed legged for such long periods of time can get really painful.

I can honestly say that these sittings have been some of the most painful experiences of my life. What eventually happens though is that the pain reaches a certain point where the mind just lets go, after this you realize that it wasn't only the physical sensation which was causing you so much pain but your mental reaction to it also. You find that when unpleasant sensations arise if you don't react to them then they won't overwhelm you.

In this way it begins to become clear that in life too, by creating aversion to unpleasant experiences you only produce more mental suffering for yourself. In the same way, craving the pleasant things in life and creating attachment results in suffering too. After all none of us has complete control over what happens in life.. All we can attempt to control are our reaction to whatever comes along.

Right this is all getting a bit heavy now! During the ten days of a course like this there are all sorts of highs and lows. It's amazing the extremes you go through. At times, I've felt like my mind is about to explode and that at any moment I could lose it altogether. At other times I've felt a sense of peace and clarity like nothing I've ever experienced before. At times I've just been sitting there on a break and the only thought in my mind is "I'm sure I should be thinking something right now." It's only when you go on a course like this that you realize how incredibly busy your mind usually is. This stillness brings strange memories to the surface too. I've remembered parts of my life that I hadn't thought about for years. One really strange thing is the clarity with which I can recall people's faces. Just thinking about someone I've only met once or twice is enough to produce a very clear image of that person in my mind.

The truly bizarre experiences come during the meditation hours though. At times it's as though you're watching a TV that's flicking between a million different channels. Random image after random image just flashes before you. To me it felt as though I was looking into my unconscious mind. Less random images also appear from your memory. I found myself reliving things from childhood that I had totally forgotten about, with this came tremendous amounts of emotion as I experienced certain episodes from my life for a second time.

It's not just mental experiences, at one point during my first course I felt as though my entire body was spinning around the axis of my head. Obviously I knew logically that this was impossible and I was still in the darkened room with those hippies but the physical feeling was so intense and I began to feel so ill that I had to open my eyes to see the world around me and be sure it was all still there. Another time, I felt as though my whole body had dissolved and there was no solid mass, just energy and vibrations.

I think it would be very easy to read this and think so what, you sat still for a while and felt a bit dizzy.....big deal! Fair enough.....but at the same time there

has been a profound effect upon my life outside of these ten day courses too. By continuing to practice I've found that my mind has slowed down. Not to the extent that I'm this passive muppet, more in the way that I no longer blindly react in certain situations. Before, I was very much ruled by my thoughts and impulses, often finding my mind rushing. Now this definitely happens less and less. More often I can watch my thoughts in a detached way and I'm aware that whatever my mood is, it will soon pass. If I'm happy then that's great but I know that it's not a fixed state of mind so when my mood changes I don't start worrying about it. In the same way if I'm unhappy I know that this feeling too will soon pass.

Towards the end of the course a third technique is taught, Metta. This is the practice of loving kindness. The basic idea is to fill yourself with unconditional love for all beings. I've found this to be particularly effective when teaching ni nen sei on Friday afternoons. The last meditation before the vow of silence ends is Metta. This creates a really positive atmosphere in which to meet everyone properly and finish the conversations you'd started ten days previously. This last day serves as a very welcome buffer day which cushions the shock of arriving back in Kyoto at rush hour the next morning.

These courses have been an amazing experience for me. Looking directly into yourself like this, it's impossible not to make a discovery or two about your nature. If anyone is looking to do something a little different while in Japan I cannot recommend this course highly enough.

If you have any questions please email me - siwid@hotmail.com

These are my experiences only, as the technique is all about self introspection I would expect anybody else's experience to be as different from mine as they are from me. This short write up is in no way an instruction in how to proceed with this form of meditation, any attempt to self-teach the method can be dangerous. Please look at the website for more information about the course. www.dhamma.org