

A Critique of Vipassana Meditation as taught by  
Mr S N Goenka

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**Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Synopsis of the retreat</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The Theoretical Basis of Vipassana</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The Critique</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1	Selective interpretation of Mr Siddharth Gautam's teaching . . .	9
4.2	The Memetic and Cultist aspects in the technique . . . . .	11
4.3	The Technique itself . . . . .	14
4.4	Theoretical orthodoxy . . . . .	21
4.5	The Vipassana Organization and Community . . . . .	25
4.6	The so-called Benefits . . . . .	26
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Copyright</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Feedback</b>	<b>29</b>

This monograph is an attempt to critically analyze Vipassana (pronounced as Vi-pashya-naa) as taught by Mr S N Goenka and his appointed teachers. Vipassana, like any other spiritual practice, has a worldview behind it. The worldview, the philosophy as well as the technique itself are examined in this article. I could not find any critical analysis of Vipassana on the internet and hence considered putting into this form my experiences and my thoughts about this meditation practice. I hope this article can foster further discussion and dialogue amongst the Vipassana community and give a critical view to anyone considering it for the first time. It may also be of some help to old meditators who are doubtful but cannot put their finger on what is wrong with this technique.

## 1 Introduction

Mr S N Goenka and teachers trained by him, have been teaching a form of Vipassana meditation in India and abroad for the last 30 odd years. Vipassana is a Pali word meaning Special (*Vi*) Observation (*Passana*). As taught by Mr Goenka, the meditation technique is taught in 12-day retreats in special centers. The retreat involves observation of the breath and bodily sensations over a twelve day period, after which the meditator is expected to continue the meditation in his daily life.

Mr Goenka was born in Burma and learnt this technique from his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, whom he came across while seeking a cure for his troublesome migraine. Mr U Ba Khin was a disciple of Mr Saya Thet, who was in turn a disciple of Mr Ledi Sayadaw. Mr Sayadaw was venerated as an *Arahant* (a fully enlightened being) in his later years.

Mr U Ba Khin established the International Meditation Center (IMC) in Rangoon, two miles north of the famous Shwedagon pagoda. Today IMC has six centers around the world. All the centres are guided by Mother Sayamagyi, Sayagyi U Ba Khin's closest disciple, who has practised and taught meditation for more than fifty years and have carried on the tradition since Sayagyi U Ba Khin's demise in 1971.<sup>1</sup>

Mr Goenka spent fourteen years with Mr U Ba Khin and became a Vipassana teacher himself. It was U Ba Khin's wish to go to India to teach and propagate Vipassana in its country of origin but he could not fulfill his dream. Mr Goenka, was however, able to go to India and started teaching Vipassana. After many years, as the technique became popular, centers were established in various parts of India and abroad. The headquarters of the Vipassana movement is in Igatpuri (near Bombay).

The centers run retreats of varying durations, ranging from 12 days to more than two months. The 12-day retreat is the most frequently held and attended.

Since the primary vehicle for the meditation is this 12-day retreat, I will now try and give a precise synopsis of it.

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<sup>1</sup><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.Ba.Khin>

## 2 Synopsis of the retreat

The retreats are fully residential and free of cost.

They begin in the evening of the first day (Day Zero) and end on the morning of the 12th (Day Eleven).

The retreats are referred to as 10-day retreats by the Vipassana organization, but since there are important activities on the day the students arrive and on the day they leave, I will describe the retreat over the full twelve days. However, since in Vipassana literature, the days of the retreat are counted from the second day (of the 12 day retreat), I will call the first day as Day Zero, the second day as Day One, and so on.

Each meditation center holding a retreat has a set of residences or dormitories for the students, two dining halls (one each for males and females), and one or more meditation halls. All instructions and discourses are provided via pre-recorded audio and video media in the voice of Mr Goenka in the meditation hall. In the hall, on a raised platform, there are one or more teachers who sit, meditate, operate the audio/video equipment and answer the students' questions during break periods. The instructions and discourses are bi-lingual (in English and in Hindi) (though special arrangements are made for people who do not understand either of these languages) and the chanting is in Pali.

The daily schedule is as follows:

0400	Wake up bell
0430 – 0630	Meditation in the meditation hall (MH) or at one's own residential quarters (RQ)
0630 – 0800	Bath and Breakfast
0800 – 0900	<b>Group meditation (GM) in MH</b>
0900 – 1100	Meditation in MH or at RQ
1100 – 1300	Lunch and Rest, or meet with the teacher
1300 – 1430	Meditation in MH or at RQ
1430 – 1530	<b>GM in MH</b>
1530 – 1700	Meditation in MH or at RQ
1700 – 1800	Tea break
1800 – 1900	<b>GM in MH</b>
1900 – 2030	Discourse
2030 – 2100	Meditation in MH
2100 – 2130	Meet with the teacher
2200	Lights out

As one can see, the schedule is quite rigorous and people not used to waking up early or sitting for long periods can find the first few days quite trying. The three group sittings (in bold above) are not optional and everybody has to stay within the MH for the entire one hour. The other sittings are more flexible and one can either sit in the MH or at one's own residence but one is expected to be meditating during the designated periods. The breakfast is at 6.30am and lunch is at 11am. There is tea with some biscuits at 5pm for the new students (those who are undertaking the retreat for the first time). Old students are only

allowed to have lemon water in the evening.

## Summary of the retreat

**8pm Day Zero:** Retreat starts

**8pm Day Zero – 3pm Day Four:** Anapana meditation (choiceless observation of the breath)

**3pm Day 4 – 9am Day 10:** Vipassana meditation (equanimous observation of bodily sensations)

**9am Day 10 – 10am Day 10:** Metta meditation (sharing one's merit and goodwill), silence ends

**4.30am Day 11 – 6.30am Day 11:** Final discourse and Metta, Retreat ends

## Day Zero

The students gather in the meditation center office and get registered. They acknowledge in writing that the course has a rigorous discipline and involves hard work. There is a light meal at 6pm. Preliminary guidelines about staying in the center and about the course are given at 7pm. Students gather in front of the meditation hall and are allotted seats (cushions) as they enter the hall one by one. At 8pm they undergo some formal vows and undertakings, which are as follows:

1. **The Three Shelters:** The students repeat, thrice, in Pali, that they hereby get sheltered by the three gems (the Buddha (the Enlightened one), the *Dhamma* (the noble eightfold path) and the *Sangha* (the community of seekers and monks)).
2. **The Five (or Eight) vows for the following ten days:** New students take five vows:
  - (a) To refrain from stealing
  - (b) To refrain from killing
  - (c) To refrain from telling lies (in this context, to remain in noble silence, i.e., to not communicate in any manner, verbal or non-verbal, with anyone except the administration or the teacher)
  - (d) To refrain from sexual misconduct (in this context, to abstain from all sexual activity including self-stimulation)
  - (e) To avoid all intoxicants

Old students take three more vows:

- (f) To refrain from eating after noon
- (g) To refrain from any bodily decoration (ornaments etc.)
- (h) To refrain from sleeping on high or luxurious beds (however, all students, new or old, get similar accommodation and bedding)

3. **The Three Surrenders:** The students surrender themselves for the next ten days to the teacher, the discipline and the teaching.
4. **The Request:** The students formally make a request to be taught Anapana meditation.

The students are then instructed to focus on the nasal region and to start observing their breathing as it is naturally happening. At 9pm, all retire to their individual rooms or dormitories.

## Day One

The day proceeds as per schedule. The meditation during the first day involves observing the breath as it is naturally happening, as one inhales or exhales. The focus remains on the nasal region and on remaining aware of whether one is using one or both the nostrils while breathing. The students are advised to breathe a little hard for a few moments if they are unable to concentrate their minds or if they are unable to feel the breath.

## Day Two

The meditation during the second day involves observing the breath as before, with the added awareness of where the breath is touching the skin in the nasal region.

## Day Three

Today the awareness of breath includes what sensations one is feeling on the skin in the nasal region (on the nose, on the nostril rings and below the nose and above the upper lip).

## Day Four

The afternoon group sitting on day four is, unusually, from 2pm to 3pm. Till 3pm the awareness of breath continues, with a further limitation of the area on which one is supposed to focus and experience the sensations. The new area of focus is limited to below the nostrils and above the upper lips.

At 3pm, students make a formal request to be taught Vipassana and the teaching commences forthwith.

The students are instructed to move their focus to the top of the head and methodically move it through each part of the body till the focus reaches the tips of the toes, feeling the sensations on each part of the body as they traverse the body. The students are instructed not to either like or dislike the sensations and to calmly and equanimously observe them as being transient phenomena.

In the evening GM session, students are exhorted to remain still and not move their hands, legs or to open their eyes during the entire one hour period of the three GMs per day for the remainder of the retreat. These three sittings

are now called **Sittings of Strong Determination**. This facet of the meditation is not mentioned in the course introduction brochure.

### **Day Five**

Vipassana continues as taught on Day four.

### **Day Six**

Today the traversal of focus through the body proceeds in both directions: from the head to the toes, and then from the toes to the head. Sensations are to be observed equanimously with the understanding of their transience.

### **Day Seven**

Today the traversal of focus through the body proceeds simultaneously and symmetrically through both the arms, both the legs etc. and in both directions as on day six.

### **Day Eight**

Today the traversal proceeds through as many parts as possible simultaneously (i.e. through the entire body, if possible, in one go). If the students can shift the focus easily through the body because of uniform subtle sensations in the various parts, they are instructed to let the focus flow and after one or two such free-flows, to again pass the attention through the body part-by-part.

### **Day Nine**

Today the traversal proceeds en masse through the body in a free flow if possible, and part-by-part otherwise. Those who can feel subtle sensations all over the body are asked to see if they can feel the sensations inside the body as well by moving their focus piercingly and penetratingly through the body. Those who can feel subtle sensations inside as well are asked to see if they can pass their focus through the spinal cord as well. After this, the students who have been able to feel their bodies inside out are asked to do spot checks by taking their focus randomly to a body part and to see if the mind immediately feels a sensation in the area of focus and if the sensation remains limited to the area of focus.

### **Day Ten**

After the morning GM session, the students are taught Metta (or goodwill) meditation. In this, they are instructed to “fill” their subtle sensations with love and compassion and to let the subtle sensations permeate the atmosphere. There are verbal suggestions to forgive and forget, to love all and to distribute

one's merits. After this session, at 10am, the noble silence ends and students interact with each other but they cannot leave the center yet.

The students can also buy books and audio/visual material on Vipassana and donate as per their inclination.

A film on Vipassana might be shown at 1pm in the MH. The afternoon and evening GMs happen as usual. The evening tea and snacks are open for the old students as well. The discourse in the evening is not followed by meditation.

## **Day Eleven**

In the morning at 4.30am, students gather in the MH for a final video discourse which continues for two hours till 6.30am. This discourse advises the students on how to continue the meditation practice at home and concludes with a final session of Metta, or goodwill.

The students proceed for breakfast, clean up their residences, and leave as per their convenience in a few hours.

## **3 The Theoretical Basis of Vipassana**

The technique is based on the following assumptions (enumerated by myself). Most of these assumptions can be traced to the various Indian religious or Buddhist traditions. Many of them are unique to Vipassana or to Buddhism and are not part of other religions or meditation practices:

1. There is suffering and sorrow in life, and nothing but suffering and sorrow in life.
2. The suffering is due to craving, aversion and ignorance.
3. The conditioning which leads to craving and aversion is passed from birth to birth and can take many lives to get rid of, by assiduous practice of Vipassana.
4. The freedom from suffering lies in a timeless, formless, non-sensory state of bliss and not in the temporal, tangible and sensory realm.
5. Craving and aversion for impermanent states and phenomena is a habit pattern of the mind.
6. The mind can be divided into the superficial part and the deep part. The superficial part is the intellect and the conscious mind, the deep part is the unconscious mind.
7. Changing the superficial mind and leaving the deep mind unchanged will not lead to liberation from suffering.
8. The deep mind functions at the level of, and reacts habitually to, bodily sensations whereas the superficial mind works logically and intellectually.

9. Any sensory or relational experience in life, if interpreted as pleasant, leads to pleasant bodily sensations and vice versa, which are then reacted to with craving or aversion, respectively, by the deep mind.
10. The superficial mind should be brought under a semblance of control by moral strictures (called *Sīla*), it should be focused by a concentration practice (called *Samādhi*), and the reactive habit patterns of the deep mind should be changed by then training the (superficial) mind to become aware of the bodily sensations and to not react to them but to understand them as impermanent, full of suffering, and as egoless (this understanding is called *Pragyā* or *Pañña*). We should become masters of our minds.
11. As the mind becomes unattached and equanimous towards sensory experiences, it can experience the non-sensory, timeless bliss which will lead to freedom from the cycle of birth and death.
12. This particular technique of practicing Vipassana was part of all religious traditions but was lost and forgotten over the ages. It was formally rediscovered by Mr Siddharth Gautam (circa 500 BC) and was maintained in its “pristine condition” by a few people in Burma.

## 4 The Critique

The critique is from several angles. A summary of the critique is as follows:

1. Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr Goenka and his appointees is a highly selective and subjective interpretation of Mr Siddharth Gautam’s teaching.
2. There are strong memetic and cultist aspects in the organization established by Mr Goenka and in the retreats held by it.
3. There are very serious shortcomings with the technique itself. The technique can precipitate and exacerbate Depersonalization, a dissociative disorder (as defined in DSM-IV)
4. There is a high degree of theory and orthodoxy in the description and rationalization of the technique.
5. As in any institution promising evolution, people quickly organize themselves into a hierarchical and comparative setup and it is quite evident in Vipassana.
6. The benefits claimed to be the results of this technique need to be re-examined.

## 4.1 Selective interpretation of Mr Siddharth Gautam's teaching

1. There is no proof of Mr Gautam having taught this technique in this form (as claimed by Mr Goenka). Various Buddhist texts are cited and chanted in the retreat but nowhere in those texts is a methodical traversal of the body or focusing on the skin or patiently observing those parts which cannot be felt (in the nasal region or in other parts of the body) recommended or described. If Mr Gautam had indeed re-discovered this technique which had been lost to humanity, it is reasonable to expect that he would codify this technique or this practice quite descriptively in some discourse or text.

Mindfulness is one of the eight aspects of the Noble Eight-fold path in Buddhism. There are many kinds of meditation practices in Buddhism (see for example "Cultivating a Daily Meditation" by the Dalai Lama) but Vipassana, specifically, is a mindfulness practice.

In the *Mahasatipatthana Suttam* (the Great Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness), Mr. Gautam mentions four aspects of a mindfulness practice. The discourse begins by describing the monk's awareness of the natural breath, and then proceeds to describing the following:

***Kayānupassanā***: The awareness of the body and of bodily postures.

***Vedanānupassanā***: The awareness of the sensations.

***Chittānupassanā***: The awareness of the mind.

***Dhammānupassanā***: The awareness of the mental contents and states.

The *Suttam* is quite long. However, the section on *Vedanānupassanā* is very short (only two paragraphs), only describing that a monk observes sensations as follows:

Here, O monks, a monk, while experiencing a pleasant sensation, knows properly, "I am experiencing a pleasant sensation"; while experiencing an unpleasant sensation, he knows properly, "I am experiencing an unpleasant sensation"; while experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant sensation, he knows properly, "I am experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant sensation." While he is experiencing a pleasant sensation with attachment, he knows properly, "I am experiencing a pleasant sensation with attachment"; . . .

Thus he abides observing sensations with sensations internally, or he abides observing sensations within sensations externally, or he abides observing sensations within sensations both internally and externally. Thus he abides observing the phenomenon of arising of sensations, thus he abides observing of passing away of sensations, thus he abides observing the

phenomenon of simultaneous arising-and-passing-away of sensations. Awareness that, “This is sensation” remains present in him. Thus he develops his awareness to such an extent that there is mere understanding along with mere awareness. In this way he abides detached, without clinging or craving towards anything in this world of mind and matter. This is how, monks, a monk abides observing sensations within sensations.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere is starting from the top of the head, traversing the body simultaneously and symmetrically etc., or stopping and focusing at the body parts which are not having subtle sensations, explicitly training the mind to remain detached to the sensations by mentally understanding their transience, etc. mentioned. In short, this technique of dispassionately observing bodily sensations by a methodical traversal of the body as a full mindfulness practice is a development independent of Mr Gautam’s teaching in this *Suttam*.

2. Mr Goenka and the Vipassana Research Institute (VRI) give a specific meaning to the word *vedanā* (sensation) used in Buddhist texts to suit this technique of Vipassana in which one focuses on bodily (as in over and under the skin) sensations to the exclusion of other sensory and mental experiences. Body sensations are due to various causes, including the food eaten, the posture, body ailments, and the external environment. To this, VRI adds that the sensations can also arise from past conditionings of the mind (*sankhārās*), which is dubitable at best and is not described by Mr Gautam anywhere in his discourses.

In the chain of dependant origination in Buddhist philosophy, it is said:

Dependant on the six sense spheres, contact arises.  
Dependant on contact, sensation arises.  
Dependant on sensation, craving arises.<sup>3</sup>

Here sensation is clearly the sensation which follows a contact with an external sense object and can be any one of the various sensory experiences (i.e. sound, vision, taste, smell or touch, or mental processes) , and not just the sensations on the skin or under the skin as claimed by Mr Goenka and VRI.

See, for example, the following words ascribed to the Buddha:

“The six classes of feeling should be known.” Thus was it said.  
In reference to what was it said? Dependent on the eye and forms there arises consciousness at the eye. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there

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<sup>2</sup>*Mahasatipatthana Suttam*, published by VRI, April 1993, pp 21-23

<sup>3</sup>*Vinaya, Mahavagga*: VRI, 1; PTS 2

is feeling. Dependent on the ear and sounds there arises consciousness at the ear. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there is feeling. Dependent on the nose and aromas there arises consciousness at the nose. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there is feeling. Dependent on the tongue and flavors there arises consciousness at the tongue. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there is feeling. Dependent on the body and tactile sensations there arises consciousness at the body. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there is feeling. Dependent on the intellect and ideas there arises consciousness at the intellect. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition there is feeling. “The six classes of feeling should be known.” Thus was it said...<sup>4</sup>

And also, clearly, *sankhārās* are not a cause of sensation (they occur later in the chain of origination). This will be dealt with in more detail later.

## 4.2 The Memetic and Cultist aspects in the technique

Meme is a word coined by Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, which defines an idea or thought unit whose replication and propagation happen via the media, the community, various institutions, rituals and practices (just as genes propagate via DNA). Organized religions and community practices cannot survive without a memetic propagation aspect and Vipassana is no exception. Not only are memetic and cultist aspects quite visible in Vipassana, the organization encourages these traits by various subtle and not-so-subtle means.

One may reasonably wonder what compels Mr Goenka to propagate this technique and engage in such hard work to train the teachers and to teach thousands of people and maintain a donation-based series of centers. It may indeed be possible that he is driven by a sense of compassion and altruism. One may be hard-pressed to find any selfish motives in a free-of-charge meditation retreat or (say) in a free meal in a Gurudwara or in a Church. But comprehension is made easier if one understands that propagation and acceptance of ideas one holds dear affords great inner pleasure and joy.

To be sure, Vipassana has fewer cultist aspects than many other communities or new-age practices. But educated and otherwise intelligent people may conclude that there are none, where there are in fact many.

1. Use of Pali language is quite prevalent in Vipassana retreats. Pali is not a language in common usage anywhere in India at present but it is used extensively in the Vipassana retreats. Right from the morning chants, to chants before or after each GM session, to chanting *Bhavatu Sabbe*

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<sup>4</sup>*Chachakka Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya 148)*

*Mangalam* (thrice) after every meditation sitting. Mr Goenka fondly uses the Pali language because, in his own words, it has “good vibrations”.

2. Use of Buddhist formalities and practices is explicit. Beginning with the sheltering under the triple gem, an important Buddhist ritual, to chanting in Pali for the vows and for requesting to be taught the meditation technique, and to all students chanting *Sādhu Sādhu Sādhu* after the *Bhavatu Sabbe Mangalam*, and use of the Buddhist terms of *Sankhārā* and *Pragyā* (or *Pañña*), these are all remnants of Buddhist traditions. As Buddhism is one of the minority religions in India, apart from the sense of novelty, the reviving of an obscure tradition can give a special and exclusivist pleasure to many people who suffer from rootlessness in the modern world.

The espousal, in the retreats, of a non-material entity called *Dhamma* is a strong exhortation for people to propagate this meme. Even though it is mentioned many times in the retreat discourses that *Dhamma* means nothing but the laws of nature and the nature of reality, in actuality, *Dhamma* has a very specific meaning from the Buddhist traditions and means the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path (see for example the section on *Dhammanupassana* (i.e. awareness of *Dhamma*) in the *Mahasatipatthana Suttam*). It is disingenuous to give a special meaning to *Dhamma* in the discourses and then to chant on the ninth and the tenth day that “May *Dhamma* pervade every person and atom in the world.” After all, if *Dhamma* is the law of nature, then it already pervades everything.

3. Maintaining the purity and sanctity of the meme is of great importance to any memetic group. Mr Goenka lays formidable emphasis on the pristine maintenance of the technique and practice. Teachers and old students are strongly cautioned not to practice any other technique for fear of harm or of pollution to the technique, nor to change even the smallest aspect of the Vipassana practice. The teachers are trained to play the audio/video tapes of Mr Goenka as-is and are asked in no uncertain terms not to indulge in any discourse or to disseminate the technique on their own. In the Vipassana folklore, it has happened many times that a teacher has been “blacklisted”, or a student has been barred from attending a retreat because of his/her practicing of Reiki or other vibe-oriented new-age practices.
4. Vipassana is subtly described as the one true path to liberation. All other practices and philosophies are described as either incomplete, as superficial intellectual games or as distant echoes of Vipassana. Due to the special significance and rationale given to dispassionate observation of the bodily sensations, other techniques are considered as only being able to reform the surface mind, whereas Vipassana is claimed to change the unconscious layers of the mind as well. Many teachers contemporary of Mr Goenka are subtly put down, especially Mr Mohan Rajneesh, whose fleet of Rolls

Royce's and lack of emphasis on morality find an ironical and indirect mention in Mr Goenka's discourses.

5. Mr Goenka, the appointed teachers, and the old students are visibly attached to the technique and to its associated terms (*Dhamma*, *Sankhārā*, *Mangal*) and phraseology. In the very words of Mr Goenka, after a year or so of practicing, daily meditation becomes a necessity and one feels uncomfortable at missing a daily sitting (a hallmark of addictive memes). Forming local communities of meditators and enrolling other family members is encouraged. The group dynamics are described as fostering "good vibrations" and as "re-charging" of someone whose practice is not going too well.
6. Mr Goenka has a distinctive voice while chanting, which has a lot of reverberation (which sounds like gurgling) and low-frequency humming. Initially quite a few people are disconcerted by his voice since it is so unusual (he talks normally during the discourses) but memes are made stronger by distinction and one ascribes great qualities to things one finds strange. Repetition of various phrases and sentences (at the beginning and end of each meditation session) is made ritualistic despite the professed best intentions of Mr Goenka.
7. Creation of new symbols and communities is now proceeding with earnest in Vipassana circles. Naming of each meditation center in Pali and containing the word *Dhamma*, creation of a very large golden pagoda-cum-meditation-center near Bombay (called the Global Pagoda) as a symbol of the resurgence of Vipassana and Buddhism in India, formation of special residential colonies near Igatpuri for Vipassana meditators who wish to live together, special newsletters and seminars containing announcements, poetry and testimonials, verificationist research papers (making no falsifiable claims) etc., all are indicative of Vipassana establishing itself not just as a meditation technique, but also as an idea and as a community.
8. The discourses play their own part in propagating the meme. The presentation of ideas in the evening discourses is very carefully planned (the discourses have gone through various editions to refine their effectiveness). The discourses happen at the end of the day, when students have had a hard day, with their minds numb from focusing, and when they are looking forward to rest. The final discourse happens at 4.30am on Day Eleven. Not only do the discourses happen at a time when students' are tired or not fully active, the content of the discourses makes them something to look forward to (they contain many jokes, anecdotes and stories) and the ideas presented are easily imbibed by the students' pliant minds. The various subjects covered in the discourses are carefully chosen based on the day of the retreat to have the maximum effect. Various Indian religions and deities are praised to give a comfort factor to the new students and to make them feel as if this is their own technique.

It is not true that only the technique is explained in the discourses. Many arcane Buddhist concepts and ideologies are described, including the repulsiveness of the body, the timeless, formless state of bliss, the four kinds of enlightened beings etc.

### 4.3 The Technique itself

1. First of all, this is a dissociative meditation practice with the professed (intermediate) goal of making one the detached observer of phenomena rather than an involved party. This may sound fine to people ingrained in the eastern religions, as in eastern philosophies the world is considered a mirage or an appearance. The Self (or the Soul) is considered a non-material observational entity, whose liberation is sought from any link to this world of suffering towards a timeless, formless, sense-less world (called Heaven, Nirvana, the Void, etc.).

Mr Goenka is very emphatic in saying that most people, though they believe themselves to be neither the body, nor the carriers of the body, nevertheless are identified as being the body or as being the carriers of the body. His aim is to make this act of belief an insight, rather than just a belief, by actually helping people see the truth of the mind-body phenomenon. He does not, however, question or raise the issue of who or what exactly it is that is to be liberated?

The Soul that is identified with the body or which considers itself the body is sought to be liberated. But whether the Soul is real or illusory or not is not questioned. Only its identification is questioned. Mr Goenka repeatedly claims that it makes no difference if one believes or does not believe in a Soul, but dissociative practices all implicitly believe in an entity (or awareness) which can be dissociated. Mr Goenka explicitly discourages discussion about this topic.

As in all spiritual disciplines, the focus is on getting rid of the ego, or self with the small “s”, and becoming the All, the Complete, or the Self with the capital “S”. In Buddhist terminology, the journey is phrased in other terms, from Ignorance and Attachment to Liberation, but the essence remains the same.

Two thousand years of dissociative spiritual practices in India have changed the psyche of its people so deeply that they genuinely consider this earth and the universe as a subjective creation with their only loyalty or faith (howsoever half-baked) in some God or in some other non-physical realm. Hence, they regard any occurrence in the outside world only with as much importance as it interferes with their own life. The awareness that there are other subjective entities, and the civic responsibility and order this awareness implies, is understandably absent in Indian society. The Indian psyche is already dissociated from the world to some extent.

Dissociative practices, which claim to make one the pure observer, are

very attractive to the Indian mind, which finds suffering all around and wants an individual, solipsistic and non-material way to find happiness, howsoever illusory.

In modern psychiatry, dissociation is treated as a disorder. Depersonalization disorder is a specific illness under the category of dissociative disorders in the fourth edition of DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the world standard in psychiatry).

Patients with this dissociative disorder experience episodes during which they feel detached from themselves. They may experience themselves or their surroundings as unreal. They may feel outside or lacking control of themselves. They retain awareness that this is only a feeling.

Diagnostic criteria for 300.6 Depersonalization Disorder

- A. Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (e.g., feeling like one is in a dream).

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The questions to ask are: Am "I" the problem for this body or is this body the problem for "I"? Do "I" need to get rid of any linkage to this body or does this body need freedom from the clutches of an ego entity or Being which calls itself the self or the Self.

Vipassana and other dissociative practices seek to get the body out of the way of "I" so that "I" can dwell in a body-less realm of peace and happiness. The problem of suffering is quite real. But the solution might be quite different than dissociating from this world.

2. The hard regimen of Vipassana retreats puts off many people. Many do not join for they find the schedule scary. There are many reasons for the harsh schedule, not all of them explicit. The reason given by Mr Goenka is that people should not have any time left for idle activities and useless chatter. There are other reasons as well.

Firstly, since the courses are free, making them easy will attract a large number of freeloaders who just want to have a pleasant vacation in a nice picturesque nature retreat. The hard regimen, the light and bland meals, and the *Dhamma* workers who constantly keep a watch on the students who are not being serious discourage such frivolous visitors.

Secondly, students are not allowed any time for reflection or thinking over what they are being taught, nor are they allowed to discuss the technique with others or to read/write about it. This makes the propagation of the meme easier.

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/depersdis.htm>

Thirdly, students go through intense sensory and mental deprivation. For ten days, they sit for almost 12-13 hours everyday in silence watching their breath or their body sensations. After the first four days, they may also be sent to sit in small black pagoda cells which are dark and built like a cave. The experiential deprivation allows the mind the focus on the only sensory experience possible: the bodily sensations.

Fourthly, there is a great sense of achievement at having completed a gruelling retreat. Many come to the retreat apprehensively, and some leave in the middle because they find it too tough. Those who make it to the tenth day congratulate themselves and others.

Fifthly, the hard regimen and the jail-like conditions have a special effect on the tenth day, which will be described in section 6.

3. The progress of a student in Vipassana is clearly based on the subtlety of the experience with equanimity being a secondary consideration. Equanimity is not the center of the technique; it is merely a tool to experience new vistas of sensations. Despite what Mr Goenka claims, progress on the path of Vipassana is clearly marked not by the strength of one's equanimity towards the experience (which is not easily measurable) but by the sensations one is experiencing (which can be easily ascertained). The following stages in Vipassana can be deduced from the instructions and the discourses:

- (a) One starts feeling sensations all over the body (gross or subtle). (Mr Goenka calls this an an important station on the way)
- (b) One starts feeling subtle sensations all over the body and gets a free flow. (Mr Goenka again calls this a very important milestone, that he claims one reaches in one or more retreats)
- (c) One starts feeling sensations inside the body as well (gross or subtle).
- (d) One starts feeling subtle sensations both inside and outside the body.
- (e) One starts feeling subtle sensations in the spinal cord as well.
- (f) One succeeds in spot checking of various body parts and immediately gets a delimited, subtle sensation at the spot check area.
- (g) One may experience "very deep rooted *sankhārās*" after stage F and experience some gross sensations or inert areas even after this stage.

If a goal is put before the human mind, especially regarding its spiritual evolution, and others in close proximity are also going after it, the competitive spirit naturally surfaces. Students crave for each successive state and are deeply frustrated at not reaching the milestones described by Mr Goenka. The 12-day retreat becomes an exercise in reaching the goals described by Mr Goenka, and not in understanding one's mind or responses. The drive of the mind to experience a new state described/promised by another is much, much stronger than the repeated advice given by Mr

Goenka that the students should not get frustrated or depressed if they are not being successful. It is a natural question to ask why would Mr Goenka think the students would get frustrated or depressed, and what is the success being talked of here? The obvious answer is that students are chasing goals defined by Mr Goenka, they want to get some benefit out of the 12 days and the benefit is supposed to be concurrent with experiencing something new.

4. There is a lot of doing involved in this technique, even though it is supposed to be a pure observation (or mindfulness) practice and one which is claimed to take one to becoming a mere observer. The first four days are comparatively much more concerned with pure awareness, albeit of a selective aspect of one's mind-body (the breathing and the sensations in the nasal region). The last six days involve a lot of tiresome movement of the mental focus through the body, stopping at inert body parts, making the traversal in different ways. The mind becomes almost numb with this repeated traversal of the body while looking for sensations.

Mr Goenka understands that this is boring and tiresome. In the retreat, it still remains somewhat interesting because a new aspect is added every night to the traversal (see the description of the Days in the last section). When advising the students to practice at home, Mr Goenka warns them about this boredom and asks them to traverse the body in different ways and not mechanically in the same way. It is a telling comment on a technique which is supposed to teach one about the truths of the mind and the body that it gets boring so soon.

5. The experiences of inner silence are due to low oxygen supply to the brain (medically called Hypoxia). The mind becomes very quiet after the first few days, after focusing on the nasal region, and the breath becomes very slight. As the oxygen supply to the brain becomes much lesser than normal, the brain activity simmers down considerably. The peace experienced by the brain is an artificial peace created by mild hypoxia.

Mr Goenka, in common with most spiritual teachers, quite openly lambasts the brain's nature of random associative chatter (which Anapana and other concentration practices control to a great extent), without understanding the evolutionary value of this chatter. If the brain is asked to focus on something which is not perceived to be of intrinsic value by the brain, the brain will naturally get distracted towards what it considers of value. Observation of the breath is a goal imposed by someone else and naturally the brain is not interested.

The unresolved issues in the brain will occupy it during the time it is idle. The issues may get resolved, they may not. But the inner chattering of the brain is the brain thinking associatively, productively or not, about the issues it considers important. A concentrated and calm brain will be able to think more clearly about a particular issue, and any focusing technique will be helpful in this regard.

There is another value to the random associative chatter of the brain, and that is: it may form unexpected connections and make new discoveries. That is why some out-of-the-box solutions to long-standing problems may appear while day-dreaming or while dreaming at night when free association is in progress.

I make the unverified claim here that creative people and inventors will be severely crippled by a non-chattering brain. Their creativity and fresh ideas can only come from new neural pathways established by random firing of the neurons and a hypoxia-induced state of low neural activity will be a handicap for such people. People doing habitual jobs requiring low amounts of creative thinking, including students (who need to ingest information given in books and lectures) will be helped a lot by any concentration or calming practice.

6. The teaching of equanimity is explicit, rather than it being an insight of the student. Mr Goenka makes it a point to repeatedly suggest to students that they should not like or dislike the sensations, because they are impermanent. Impermanence is not a factor left to be individually experienced by the students; it is almost made a mantra by the Vipassana meditators (*Anicca Anicca Anicca*). An actual experiencing of impermanence is made a conditioned discovery due to the repetitive proclamations by Mr Goenka that all sensations are impermanent, and that that is why any craving or aversion towards them will lead to suffering. It might be true, but the insight is spoon-fed to the students, students are not given time to develop this insight on their own.

It is quite clear that the mind is being trained to be equanimous towards the sensations, and the training is happening via an outside cue and via an intellectual argument, not by direct insight. Students do experience the impermanence of the sensations, but Mr Goenka suggests repeatedly that this impermanence should make one fearful of forming any craving or aversion towards the sensations. Why not let the students make up their own mind?

J Krishnamurti, another spiritual teacher who advocated choiceless awareness of “what-is”, was quite vocal in dismissing any mental training or meditation practice and claimed that an insight, if total, fundamentally changes the brain, not slowly, but instantaneously.<sup>6</sup>

7. Advanced states of experiencing are dangled as carrots to the students. Mr Goenka cannot desist from postulating states of timeless, formless bliss, knowledge of other minds, knowledge of past births and of the four types of enlightened beings (amongst other Buddhist ideas), even though he asks the students to focus only on the present. In spiritual circles,

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<sup>6</sup>Mr Goenka, in a book, describes a meeting he had with J Krishnamurti. He said he described Vipassana to Krishnamurti and asked him whether it was a technique (notwithstanding that Mr Goenka himself calls it a technique). Krishnamurti is said to have replied in the negative.

everybody is after their own salvation (and this is actively encouraged by Mr Goenka when he asks students to selfishly seek their own Nirvana) and the description or postulation of advanced states inevitably creates an imaginary goal in the minds of seekers who then spend years or a lifetime chasing that goal.

8. The subtle sensations are not the vibrations of individual atoms or molecules; they are merely nerves being tingled and the flow of the blood and its oxygenation in the blood vessels. The gross sensations are similarly reactions of the body parts to various internal and external stimuli. Mr Goenka mentions that the mind can experience the subtle and high-frequency (of the order of 10 to the order of 20) vibration of cells, molecules and atoms and that is the way one will have a direct experiencing of impermanence. That might be true in theory.

However, the free-flow experienced while having subtle sensations on the body in Vipassana is demonstrably that of the flow of blood, its pulsing and its oxygenation and possibly electrical impulses travelling from the brain and spinal cord through various nerves to the various body parts. There is nothing *sankhārā*-related in any of this. If some body-part suffers a mild bio-chemical reaction or is in a bad posture, it may experience a gross sensation of pain or sweat etc. and that may eclipse the subtle sensations. On one hand Mr Goenka says that the *reaction* to the body sensations is what is *sankhārā*, on the other hand, he clearly mentions in the instructions on the tenth day that in stage G (as numbered by me), the very *happening* of gross sensations (and not the reaction to them) is due to “very deep-rooted *sankhārās*” and that this manifestation should be used to root out these very same *sankhārās*, which would not otherwise be possible in earlier states.

In short, the occurrence of body sensations have nothing to do with any eruption of *sankhārās*; they are expressions of normal body processes. Reactions to them are conditioned responses of the brain, and the brain can be trained not to react in a habitual way to them. This is all there is to Vipassana, training the mind to not react to bodily sensations.

Assumption 9 from Section 3 is relevant here. It is true that any mental event (e.g. the excitation of certain neurons or nerves) has a physical effect. But it is very much debatable whether by training the mind to be equanimous towards normal body sensations, one gains equanimity to all experience. Even if one goes by Buddhist philosophy, in the chain of dependant origination, Mr Gautam clearly mentions that contact and sensation can arise in any of the six sensory realms (if one includes the mind as the sixth sensory realm), hence the sensation of touch and the sensations inside the body are but one of the six realms.

More than that, this is blind equanimity. This is not equanimity with understanding. The Vipassana technique is simple: “Whatever the body sensation, observe it equanimously.” This does not lead to any understanding

of one's conditioning. This is training the mind to become equanimous without going into the reasons for one's reactions (the reasons may be one's upbringing or education, cultural or peer-group conditioning, or instinctual drives).

9. Reactivity of the brain to body sensations, or to other sensory input, is an evolutionary trait of the human brain. It is an important survival tool for the human body. As soon as the body experiences pain or heat or intense cold or any other harmful condition, the brain signals the body to react appropriately and to adjust so as to get rid of that harmful condition. For example, sitting for a long time in a single posture might restrict the blood flow or press some important nerve, so the brain signals the body to change its position.

While it is indeed true that many reactions are harmful and counterproductive (e.g. egotism, anger, fear, desire, aggression, restlessness, stress), and these reactive habits and instinctual behavior patterns need to be obliterated, the autonomic systems of the body have a certain intelligence of their own which should not be tampered with. Imagine what would happen if the brain was confused when confronted with the pain of angina on whether to observe it dispassionately or to react immediately by lying down and avoid a heart attack.

10. Certain specific neural pathways in the brain are sought to be re-wired by teaching one's brain to not react to bodily sensations of blood oxygenation (the subtle sensations) or of discomfort or inertness (the gross sensations) and this has nothing to do with "evaporation of past *sankhārās*".

The brain is being re-wired in a meditation practice such as Vipassana. The re-wiring is happening in a very selective part of the brain, the part responsible for reacting to body sensations. The conditioning and attitudes of the brain are more than this small part and one should be under no illusion that one is getting liberated (whatever that may mean) by re-wiring a small part of the brain by practicing Vipassana throughout one's life. All talk of the *sankhārās* coming to the surface, getting weak, and finally getting "evaporated" is a description of certain neural pathways being slowly broken and re-wired.

There is a very real risk of epileptic attacks and epilepsy getting worse by this meditation practice as a specific part of the brain is being tampered with, combined with mild hypoxia, without fully understanding the implications.<sup>7</sup>

11. The high frequency of the subtle sensations and the free flow of the focus thus obtained is not pleasant per-se; it is pleasant because it is a mark of progress on this path. The technique values sensational states which

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<sup>7</sup>Persinger, M.A. (1993). "Transcendental meditation and general meditation are associated with enhanced complex partial epileptic-like signs: evidence for 'cognitive' kindling?" *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 76: 168-170

are previously neutral for the brain. For example, the free flow of subtle sensations is only passably pleasant to a normal human being. It is highly pleasant to the Vipassana student because it is also an indicator of his/her progress. Similarly, inert or gross-sensation areas are causes of frustration and pain not because the sensation is painful, but because the phenomenon of the sensation being gross or of the body part being inert slows one down in this journey of experiencing the novelty of subtle sensational realms.

12. In advanced states, only gross sensations are considered manifestations of past conditionings. Mr Goenka clearly mentions that in stage G (as numbered by me), the gross sensations may again happen because some very deep rooted *sankhārās* of aversion may erupt. He does not explain if the subtle high-frequency sensations are also due to some other very deep-rooted *sankhārā* of craving! Obviously not. He himself says that the subtle sensations are there anyway; only the mind has to be subtle enough to perceive them. Hence, subtle sensations are felt due to the subtlety of the brain whereas gross sensations are due to some past *sankhārā*. While he cautions the students many times against playing a “game of sensations” when they are practicing, Vipassana itself increasingly looks like that only.
13. Awareness is a limited resource. One can be aware of only a limited number of things. Some people can easily multi-task, while some need to focus closely on a single task. When one is busy being aware of the bodily sensations at one’s toes etc., one cannot be expected to give one’s full attention to the task at hand.<sup>8</sup> Mr Goenka understands this and he advises the students to fully concentrate on the task at hand and forget about Vipassana when doing their jobs. But he does advise students to, for example, become aware of their teeth chewing etc. when they are eating. Trying to become a detached observer in one’s daily life will distinctly lower one’s alertness to the outside world (this is borne by personal experience). One may experience blackouts as well. Full dissociation, where one is observing things as if at a distance, is not awareness, or apperception; it is a dysfunctional state of mind, an altered state of consciousness where the body is perceived as separate from oneself.

#### 4.4 Theoretical orthodoxy

Despite Vipassana being practiced by mostly educated people and westerners, there is a lot of theoretical orthodoxy and traditional conceptions of life and humanity which pervade its worldview. It claims to be a scientific and results-based technique but it also has a lot of baggage which one picks up unwittingly as one undergoes one retreat after another.

1. Despite the superficial scientific outlook, Mr Goenka and Vipassana meditators heartily believe in reincarnation, transfer of merits and demerits

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<sup>8</sup>In the memoirs of a pilot who tried to practice choiceless awareness (as described by J Krishnamurti) while he was operating a jet plane, he almost crashed the plane.

from past lives and into future lives, and a formless, timeless and senseless (i.e., devoid of sensory experience) realm (called Nirvana). Mr Goenka clearly believes that the experience of Nirvana is of the highest value and the goal of one's life should be to get out of the cycle of birth and death. Most Indians find this idea quite agreeable. Mr Goenka also believes that if one is taught Vipassana in some past life, one will immediately be attracted to the word "Vipassana" whenever one hears it in some later life. He also believes that people who have practiced Vipassana in past lives will progress quickly on the path in this life. Though what "quick progress" means is left unsaid. It presumably means experiencing subtle free-flows quite early in the practice. Mr Goenka himself claims to have benefitted greatly from his past practice and accumulated merits while meditating in his very first retreat with his teacher.

2. Vibrations, or vibes, are a very important part of this technique and especially of Metta meditation. The traversal and permeation of vibes in the external atmosphere is also considered very significant. In the meditation hall, the old students are seated in the center near the teacher, possibly to build a vibrating center of high energy. Similarly, teachers frequently mention that the students will have a better meditation because of some old meditators having a retreat in the same hall, or that a meditator will get "re-charged" in his practice if he/she meditates along with others on a weekly basis.

In Metta meditation, students try to permeate their vibes with good feelings and spread them out in the atmosphere. The vibes are certainly a fact of the psyche. What is probably not investigated is whether the vibes and trying to spread them sustains and perpetuates the inner Being/Self which transmits and feels them at an instinctive level.

3. The cause of ignorance (*avidyā*) is not mentioned in Buddhist texts and neither does Mr Goenka elucidate upon it. What is observable is that human beings start suffering from instinctual drives right from childhood. The cause of the instinctual drives (e.g. anger or lust) is not explained, they are merely pushed back into the past life as the continuing *sankhārās*. How the *sankhārās* began or how the supposed chain of birth and death started is not explained. In Buddhism, this issue is dismissed as an idle query not concerned with the immediate fact of suffering. However, unless one can understand the real cause of one's suffering (or ignorance) how can one address it?

For example, if it is found out that greed, lust or anger are nothing but nature's way of providing human beings (who have evolved from animals) with a survival package for ensuring their own longevity and pleasure, then one can non-spiritually investigate whether the instincts for survival are still useful or have turned counter-productive in the modern world.

4. In Vipassana, as in most of Buddhism, there is a lot of emphasis on the suffering in the world, with a disparaging view of human body, sensory

experiences and life. Body is considered an object of disgust (so that the “I” can easily get detached from being identified with it). The sorrowful aspects of life are emphasized to make one a better and more committed meditator (see for example the section on the Nine Cemetery Observations in the *Mahasatipatthana Suttam*). The wonders of the natural world, the stars in the night, the raindrops and the flowers and the waves in the ocean are considered transient phenomena and not worthy of a second look. Enjoying a sensory experience is disparaged as attachment to the senses. During the nine grueling days, there is little joy on the faces of the Vipassana students (because of the harsh jail-like conditions), despite the fervent and express wish of the Vipassana community to bring happiness to all.<sup>9</sup> A sensory pleasure like sex is condemned even between married couples.

5. The emphasis on passing one’s focus through the spinal cord on the tenth day is probably an indirect reference to the awakening of *Kundalini*, a process of activating a set of nerves in the lower spinal region, one of the esoteric practices in Hinduism which leads to ecstatic visions and hallucinations.
6. The morality inherent in this practice is strictly orthodox, condemning tobacco and alcohol, condemning pre and extra-marital sex and homosexuality, condemning the killing even of an insect, etc. While moderate consumption of tobacco or alcohol are matters of individual taste, passing a stricture on the sexual behavior of others is clearly uncalled for, as is advocating an extreme form of pacifism where students feel guilty even when they step over an ant or kill a mosquito which is bothering them. Communities which have made pacifism into a principle have suffered untold destruction and hardship at the hands of foreign invaders. On the other hand, killing of other life forms, for food (production of meat) or to protect one’s own health (killing of harmful parasites, germs and bacteria), is a normal part of human life.

While describing the noble eight-fold path, Mr Goenka goes at length about Right Livelihood where selling of wines, or manufacturing of armaments are denounced as wrong livelihoods. These activities, Mr Goenka claims, encourage others to break their morality. What is left unsaid is that arms can also be used for self-defense, and that alcohol can also serve as a beverage. Such simplistic condemnation of prevalent human behavior can easily make one self-righteous and make one feel morally superior to the masses, which is what happens in Vipassana.

7. In the evening discourses, Mr Goenka cites various religious texts (including the Rig Ved and the Bhagavad Gita) and the writings of various

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<sup>9</sup>One of the western students mentioned that it was ironic to see “Be Happy” at the end of every announcement pasted on the notice board when everybody was so grim and unhappy because of the harsh schedule. He compared it to the public announcements in George Orwell’s novel 1984 in which popular concepts were reversed by repeated propaganda.

other saints. He interprets various passages in these texts to be echoes of Vipassana technique. Even to a lay person, his interpretation is extremely subjective and unconvincing. For example, *Passna* is also a Sanskrit word meaning “to observe” and a verse in the Gita containing this word is quickly interpreted to be a reference to Vipassana as taught by Mr Goenka. Another illustration is Mr Goenka’s reference to Guru Nanak’s verse in Japji: “*Thapeya naa jaaye keeta naa hoye, aapo aap niranjan soye.*” This verse refers to the experience of bliss and enlightenment which Nanak proclaims to happen without one’s volition and doing. Mr Goenka interprets it to mean the autonomic sensations happening in the body without one’s volition. Guru Nanak’s verse “*Aad sach Jugaad sach, Hae bhee sach Nanak hose bhi sach*” is interpreted by Mr Goenka to mean the path of observing the temporal reality as it is, whereas Guru Nanak is referring here to the timeless Truth (or God) which he proclaims to be Truth in the past, present and future.

In another context, he posits that the word Ved (as in the Rig Ved) itself comes from *Vedanā*, which is factually false.

8. The transience of *sankhārās* (past impressions) is confusedly mentioned from Buddhist texts. At the end of each strong determination session, one clearly hears the chant: “*Sabbe sankhārā aniccāti*”. Now if the *sankhārās* themselves are transient, there is no reason to have aversion towards them also and to try to get rid of them. This issue is sidestepped with a few verbal acrobatics by Mr Goenka in one of the evening discourses.
9. There is a strong current in Vipassana meditation of accumulating as much practice and merits as possible in this life, in order to get a favorable next birth. Mr Goenka describes ten different kinds of merits, including charity and monkhood. He subtly indicates that one might not be able to achieve full liberation and happiness in this life but still Vipassana is worthwhile because it will bear fruit in the next life (or lives) or will help one get a good station in the next life either on earth or in some heavenly realm (a clearly Buddhist formulation). There are four kinds of enlightened or almost-enlightened beings enumerated by Mr Goenka (and in Buddhist texts):

***Shrotāpunn:*** (one who has experienced enlightenment and who will be liberated in at most seven lives).

***Sagdāgami:*** (one who will be born once more on earth)

***Anāgāmi:*** (one who will not be born on earth again but may be born in some other world and get liberated there).

***Arahant:*** (one who is liberated while on earth).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mr. Goenka was once asked point blank by a curious student as to which of the above four states he considered himself to be in. No straight answer was given, the student was instead told that it would not be proper for Mr. Goenka to judge his own state and an Arahant would be able to ascertain this.

In Buddhist practices and in Vipassana, one is to aim for one of these states and to wish and work towards a favorable next birth by accumulating the ten different kinds of merits.

#### 4.5 The Vipassana Organization and Community

1. Vipassana mostly appeals to people who are not too attached to their religious sects or practices and are seeking a simple, easy-to-understand meditation practice. In India, mostly secular, educated, middle class, earning members of society are attracted to this practice as this has superficial claims to being rational, scientific and secular and applicable to householders while holding enlightenment as the final goal. They like the novelty of the practice, its mostly non-ritualistic nature, the down-to-earth personality of the main teacher (Mr Goenka talks in an easy-to-understand way and he frequently makes humorous self-deprecating remarks towards himself) and the distinguishing fact that the retreats run on voluntary donations and voluntary service.
2. When students meet each other, one of the first questions they ask each other is if the other is a new student, and if not, how many retreats one has undergone. There is a visible humility in the other if one replies with a high enough number. Then the next question is where one has done the retreats. Some centers are considered better (having better “vibrations” or management) than others. The highest-ranking centers are in Igatpuri, Jaipur and Sonapat. There are long waiting lists for Igatpuri and the Sonapat center is only for old students or for long courses. The Vipassana enrollment forms also ask this question (the number of courses).<sup>11</sup> They ask another curious question which will be dealt with hereunder.
3. It is considered significant if someone has done a course under the live guidance of Mr Goenka or his wife (called respectfully as Mataji). Again, it might be considered an important factor in one’s practice to have been taught by Mr Goenka and to have received his vibrations and goodwill in close quarters.
4. There are mainly four categories of members of the Vipassana organization. Teachers, Assistant Teachers, *Dhamma* workers and students. Teachers are supposed to be mature and fully qualified to teach Vipassana on their own, even though they also use the audio/video recordings of Mr Goenka (probably as a practical convenience). Assistant teachers are appointed on recommendations of existing teachers who ascertain the dedication of an old student to the technique and to *Dhamma* and recommend the student and optionally, the spouse, for this role. *Dhamma* workers are old students who want to serve in a meditation center to take care of the board, lodging and the meditation schedule. Students also

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<sup>11</sup>They ignore the meditation done in the past lives!

have a hierarchy based on the number and duration of courses that they have undergone.

Each level is increasingly loyal, unquestioning and dedicated to the technique. In fact, students are not admitted to long courses unless they give in writing that they are fully convinced that Vipassana is the proper vehicle for their liberation and they have not tried any other technique in the recent past. Similarly, teachers are selected on both their maturity and on their dedication to the technique and their unfailing faith in it and their respect for Mr Goenka.

#### 4.6 The so-called Benefits

1. The technique provides an unusual experiencing of bodily sensations, and does not foster real understanding of suffering and of one's mind. One finds very mature and long-standing students and teachers who are generally very peaceful but have little understanding of their own selves beyond what is taught to them in Vipassana. One does experience novel sensations on one's body and also learns to observe them dispassionately, but re-training the mind is setting it into another habit pattern, that of equanimity. Wisdom or intelligence is not a habitual response to external events. Vipassana meditators are quite dogmatic in their beliefs and have little in the way of discussing the technique except using the arguments given to them by Mr Goenka.
2. The happiness on Day Ten of the retreat is vouched as a tell-tale sign of the goodness of Vipassana. But the happiness on that day is not just due to the meditation technique, if at all. The following reasons all contribute to a sense of relief and joy on the faces of the meditators:
  - (a) The lifestyle in the retreat is usually healthier than one's own. Clean pollution free surroundings, nourishing and bland food, no snacks or late dinners, waking up early and going to bed at nine, silence and the absence of distractions, having a calm and quiet mind, all lead a general increase in well-being and health.
  - (b) The tenth day is like the light at the end of the tunnel. The students are not free yet, but at least the confinement is over. The silence has ended and they are finally free to talk to each other. It is a great relief to finally pour out all the thoughts and questions that one has been accumulating over the past many days and it is also an end to the mental starvation. One is free to read or write. There might be a film screening at 1pm which provides an added distraction and food to the mind.
  - (c) The tough meditation regime is over. The last day has only two sittings after the silence ends. Most new students feel relieved and happy at this relaxation in the regimen.

- (d) The lunch is usually more sumptuous on the tenth day, and in the evening, even old students are allowed to eat and have tea or milk. The atmosphere in the dining hall, which is usually quiet and somber, is bustling with talk and bonhomie.
  - (e) Freedom is at hand the next day and everybody is looking forward to getting back to their lives. There are indeed students who want to do another retreat back-to-back but they are very rare and can be considered exceptions (I myself have been one of them).
  - (f) Due to the nature of Metta meditation, people go through a catharsis of varying degree on the tenth day due to the external suggestions to forgive everybody, to love all and to share one's merits that one has earned after the extremely demanding nine days.
3. Any daily or prolonged practice, if combined with a moral aspect will condition the mind accordingly. Most spiritual disciplines claim a better moral stature for their adherents. Vipassana meditators turn vegetarian, teetotalers, stop smoking, try to cut down on sex, and may stop eating after 12pm. Radhasoami followers claim similar changes in their lifestyle. Hare Krishna followers start sleeping on the floor. These changes are not because of any inherent benefit in the new lifestyle, but because it is considered a first step to inner salvation. It is true that smoking or drinking can be addictive, but a stricture only makes oneself give it up because of a moral reason, and not a pragmatic one, and makes one self-righteous. Mr Goenka gives examples of how people stop smoking or drinking and start condemning it after having stopped themselves (e.g. the ex-President of Burma), which is an illustration of a moral self taking the place of a hedonistic self. A moral self, one which does not allow smoking or drinking, can be considered better for the body because it encourages abstinence from these mildly harmful substances, but this abstinence is not from understanding but from merely following the rules of a community which are combined with a moral flavor. The self-righteousness and the feeling of superiority are as much an addiction, and socially more harmful ones (in my opinion), than any mild consumption of meat, tobacco or alcohol.
4. The necessity of continuous practice is important in any spiritual discipline and Vipassana is no exception. Mr Goenka enjoins the new students to practice regularly for at least one year (after which he says it will become habitual), to take at least one 12-day retreat every year, to start a weekly sitting in their locality, and to meditate while going to sleep, when getting up from bed and whenever one has time on one's hands. It is this continuity of practice, and the associated discipline, which is responsible for much of the benefits claimed to accrue from Vipassana. If someone is sitting silently for an hour in the morning and in the evening, the stresses of daily living automatically disappear and the mental states become milder and attenuated. One can practice just sitting silently and

doing nothing, and these benefits will still come (this is from personal experience).

Continuous practice and the weekly sittings also make one a part of the local Vipassana community and group dynamics come into play. Vipassana becomes part of one's identity and its associated morality becomes a part of one's life. That happens with almost any spiritual discipline.

5. Vipassana promotes equanimity towards bodily sensations only and does not help one in examining the instincts and one's psychic structures. Understanding one's own psyche and mental reactions is wholly absent in Vipassana.

As an example, in one of the Vipassana newsletters, there was the testimonial of a woman who received the news of her son having died. She wrote that as soon as she got the news, she felt a strong emotion and sorrow but immediately she switched her mind to watching the sweat which was forming on her hands and her increased heartbeat and faster breathing and that she came out of the reactivity in a short while. As one can see, the reaction and its causes are left unexamined and the co-occurring or autonomic body sensations are now being focused on. The causes of the strong emotion and sorrow, which could possibly be her psychic and emotional bonding to her son, or her expectations from him, are left unexamined.

## 5 Conclusion

Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr S N Goenka and his appointed teachers is one of the popular meditation practices in India and abroad. It is a dissociative practice from Burmese Buddhist traditions, having strong moral viewpoints. It claims to make one equanimous by dispassionately observing one's bodily sensations. There are serious shortcomings in this technique and in its theoretical foundations and it is likely a misinterpretation of Mr Siddharth Gautam's teaching of mindfulness. The benefits from this technique are generally the same as those from most other meditation techniques currently prevalent.

## APPENDIX

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