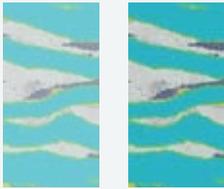


# Just Observe... Just Observe

San Francisco free-lance writer **Tony Brasunas** recently attended his first vipassana 10-day retreat. In this article he describes his experiences, both painful and blissful, with humor and insight.



**"Just observe," said the guru's voice. "Whatever the sensation, just observe."** I had been seated cross-legged, eyes closed, for what felt like hours and had probably been at least 15 minutes. The pain shooting through my back was excruciating.

"Limit your awareness to the triangular area below the nostrils and above the upper lip." He had a perfect Indian guru accent and he said the word 'nostrils' as if it were 'nose-strils'. It made me smile. My 'nose-streels.' I desperately wanted to know if anyone else was smiling, and so for the first time in what had to have been at least 18 minutes now, I opened my eyes. There we were, 200 or so of us, seated silently on the floor of a vast, wood-walled, slightly drafty hall that was vaulted like a church, but if there was a Jesus up there above the raised dais on which sat the solemn 'assistant teachers,' He had been carefully and discreetly covered by white sheeting. Down here on the floor, we meditators were seated in precise rows, as if on a chessboard. I was in spot F-9. The guy on my right, F-8, was starting to slouch forward, forward, to stretch his back. The guy right in front of me, E-9, was unmoving, a solid rock of a meditator. I was surrounded by men. On the other side of the 'A' row was an aisle, and the women were seated on the other side of the aisle. Indeed, throughout the entire ten days, the men and women were strictly segregated and we never saw each other. I discreetly

glanced around me; many men were silently shifting positions in discomfort. There were no smiles.

"Limit your awareness to the triangular area below the nostrils..." said the guru. "The focus of your mind..." I closed my eyes again and his voice went silent. My mind focused on my legs, and then on the cushion below me, and then I wondered if some people's cushions were softer than others, and then I thought about how I always want what others have, and then came the saying 'the grass is always greener on the other side,' and that made me think of the place in China where I'd been where the grass really had been greener on the other side, and that made me think of rural China, and that made me think of great rural Chinese food, and that made me wonder whether the food tonight was going to be good, and that made me think that often these retreats are expensive and have great food, but this one is free and maybe we just get bread and water, and then I thought as long as there's butter for the bread that would be tasty....

"Limit your awareness to the triangular area...."

**That's how the first day went. The second day was about the same, or worse.** I couldn't limit my awareness to my head, let alone to my nostrils. There still were no smiles. And there certainly wasn't any laughter. It was more of a shell-shocked concentration camp kind of vibe. Were we all doing some kind of suffering solidarity

project? I couldn't remember. We were observing noble silence, which means not only do you not talk, ever, but you don't communicate at all, ever. No gestures, no nodding, no shrugging, no sign language. No eye contact. I was starving not only for some kind of food in the evening (lunch was served at 11am and there was no dinner), but for some kind of human interaction. For some reason I couldn't remember, I had chosen to spend the holiday season in cold and silence.

Also there was no reading, no writing, no 'rithmetic. No ipods, no iphones, no icomputers, no idrinks at fun bars, no ichocolates to sweeten the day, no ilaughter with friends. No imusic at all. And the ibell rang at 4am every imorning to wake us up. And then we would iwalk to the meditation hall and start the day. I couldn't believe it was going to go on for 10 days like this.

I made it from day to day by listening to the guru's words in the evening discourse. "You are here to learn how to eradicate suffering," he said during one night's lecture on Buddhism. "Give this a chance." I had tried many things in life, I told myself, I could try this for ten days.

The day started at 4, and by the time my head hit the pillow at 9:30 each night, I had meditated at least 10 hours. Or at least pretended to meditate. I sat there and watched my legs and back scream in pain and my attention roam wildly over my life, my relationships, my projects, my regrets, my highlight reel of pleasant moments, my fantasies of faraway foods, sounds, and human touch. Over and over.

***On the third day I noticed that I could feel the air pass into my nostrils, even when I wasn't breathing hard or in any unusual way.*** I was able to watch that feeling for a couple whole breaths without thinking about other things. But then my back or legs would scream out, or I'd hear F-8 snorting his mucus, or I'd become unbelievably curious about something and open my eyes. Or I would start to nod off. This last one happened a lot—the guru's voice was slow and rhythmic as he trailed off into silence, and I was tired, and I had my eyes closed, and I was trying not to think. "Of Course I'm Going to Fall Asleep!" I shouted.

To myself. Nobly. Silently.

That evening, on the 5-minute walk down to the meditation hall from the men's cabins, I inhaled the cold air into my nostrils. I felt it clearly, sublimely, and I tried doing a walking meditation. It was there, nothing but the breath, and for the first time, I stayed with it continuously. My feet carried me downhill. In and out came the air. There was nothing else. In. Out. My thoughts shut off.

I thought again. My next thought. It was...I'm inside the building, taking off my shoes. I stepped into the hall, walked to F-9, arranged my cushions, and sat down.

"Limit your awareness..." came the guru's voice.

I closed my eyes and went to my "triangular area." The air came. The air went. In. Out. My thoughts shut off. The entire universe shrank, as if I had a telephoto lens, and there was only the area below my nose and above my lips. Minutes went by. I noticed I could hear more acutely. I heard all the sniffing and shifting and repositioning and occasional belching and sneezing. "It's cold," I noticed. The thought came: "People might be getting sick." Suddenly I felt pain in my back like a fire roaring up my spine. "I can't get sick," I thought. "But something's happening here," a different voice said. My body had a third voice. It whispered, cajoled, teased, yearned, screamed, bellowed at me to please, kindly, shift those legs.

I chose to stay put that time. I stayed there. I went and lived in my triangular area. The air came. The air went. Thoughts shut off. After a while I thought, "Wow, my back doesn't hurt very much right now," and the minute the thought came, like a piano dropped from a plane, the pain roared back. "MOVE!" it shrieked. "WHY ARE YOU KILLING YOURSELF?" But I stayed there. I felt the cold drafty air. My head felt cold. "You're going to get sick," my body said.

I stayed put. The universe was my nostrils. I began to feel the heat from the pain in my back spread across my spine. It rode up my neck and behind my ears and over the back of my head. I watched it. With a will of its own, the heat covered my face and burst out the top of my head. The heat pushed through my chest like a demon. I began to sweat profusely. My heartbeat

**T**here is  
this difference  
between  
one who  
knows  
and one  
who practices.

quicken. The need to move increased. My legs were asleep, completely numb, yet I could feel the heat pulse through them and down into my feet and toes. I felt sweat bead on my forehead. I watched the air come and go through my nostrils. In. Out.

The guru broke his silence. He chanted as he always did to signify that the hour meditation was over. For the first time, I hadn't moved for an entire hour.

I stumbled to my feet. An indescribable ecstasy poured through my entire body. The demon was gone. The heat had vanished. I suddenly knew I had just beaten an illness. Something had come into my body, and my focused energy had absorbed it and returned it to the universe.

I remembered at that moment that it normally takes at least a minute or two for my feet, when asleep, to reawaken to blood and sensation. And it's usually painful. This time, the moment I stood up my feet were completely normal, without pain. "Something's happening here." I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror.

**The next day**, the guru said it was time to extend the kind of focused sensation we had used with the triangular area to the entire body. "Right," I thought sarcastically. "That's impossible." Indeed, just when I was getting somewhere with my triangular area, it was gone. 'Give this a chance.'

## **TWO DEMONS AND A MONKEY**

**Those middle days were like some video game in which you have to beat two demons in order to get into a temple to fight a monkey.** The two demons on either side of the temple door are: 1. the body's howling discomfort, and 2. the body's gentle sleepiness. When I could slay those two demons, I could get inside for a chance at the Monkey, which is the mind. The mind jumped around, playfully, telling me all kinds of fascinating things, over and over again, in rapid-fire, so that I don't notice that I only have about eight different thoughts.

The Discomfort Demon I found I could vanquish with a kneeling position and an extra cushion. He would still shriek at me and tear apart my back at times, but I realized that my fears of permanent bodily damage were ridiculous; every time I stood up after meditating, the pain was gone within moments. I began to believe what the guru was saying about the relationship between the body and mind.

With the Drowsiness Demon, I stumbled on a nearly perfect solution. Naps. A 20-50 minute delicious nap (inevitably full of vast, fascinating, vivid dreams of every kind of sensual and interactive experience I was otherwise starving for.) After lunch would generally slay the Drowsiness Demon for the remainder of the day.

So I moved into the temple time and again and took on the Monkey Mind. This was the real game, and I had so many wins and losses and ties and cheating no-contests and reinventions of the rules and altogether alternative adventures that it all defies description.

What I can say is that I slowly began to sense my entire body, head to toes, with the perspicacious acuity I had first sensed in my Nostrils. As the days went on, the guru's words led us into every part of the body, and we began to move through our flesh and bones in a sweeping pattern. First the top of the head, the back of the head, the sides, then the temples, then the forehead, the eyebrows, the eyes. "Just observe," he said. "In each part of the body. What is the sensation? Is it a tingling sensation, a sharp sensation, a throbbing sensation? Is it cold, hot, painful, pleasant? Just observe. We are not here to change anything. Just observe." As the hours progressed, I was able to sense more and more subtly. The earlobe. The baby toe. The 'kneepit.' And when my thoughts returned, I could focus as I wished. I began to have new thoughts, thoughts I had never had before.

**The food served each day for lunch turned out to be good.** Very simple sauteed vegetables in a curry sauce, or Thai tofu noodles, or

vegetarian Mexican fajitas; and then there was always brown rice and white rice and salad. It was served at 11 am. After that, we had only a snack at 5pm -- tea and fruit. But after the first few days I was rarely hungry, even as my senses became so heightened

I occasionally sensed (via smell? telepathy?) what and when we were going to eat before it happened.

**On Day 8, my senses took another leap.** The guru instructed us to observe intensely our sensations not just when we were meditating, but throughout the day. That night, my snack was half an orange, and I can safely say that eating it was one of the ten most blissful experiences of my life. With open eyes, I gazed at its glorious orange color. I marveled at the patience of a drop of juice hanging on its edge. I peeled the half orange with my fingernails, feeling the soft whiteness of the underside of the rind dig into the tender flesh of my fingertips. I folded the peeled half-orange back on itself, opening it, separating it in two. A squirt of juice shot at my nose and I nearly laughed out loud in delight. I took the first section, awestruck by its perfect size and shape, and I moved it along my lips. I dropped it into my mouth and the first greeting of its sweetness turned my world inside out. I watched my tongue thrill to the fabric of the inner grains of its orange flesh. My tongue pushed it back, onto my molars, which proceeded to sort of grind and rip it apart, freeing more of its sweetness to run back across my tongue. My teeth and tongue went on playing this game for a while, and then my tongue pushed it back, further back, down the throat and into the esophagus, and then it slid into the stomach, which began its own grateful game of rending it further and getting to know in intimate detail every molecule that makes an orange an orange. My fingers tore off the next section.



**Before I knew it, it was Day 10.** We were about to begin talking as well as mingling and making eye contact and noticing that there was another gender. It seemed impossible. We concluded the morning meditation with a new kind of sitting -- an expansive joyous kind of meditation called metta bhavana that cultivates and spreads compassion and loving kindness. It was profound. The guru spoke of vibrating 'kalapas' -- subatomic particles. He explained that that this is what the universe is (essentially, the Buddha discovered 2500 years ago what today's particle physicists have begun to confirm). The guru instructed us that our meditation in our open bodies could increase the vibrational quality of the space we were in and infuse it with compassion and love for all beings.

And then we were done. The guru's voice was gone. The assistant teachers rose and walked out of the room. Some calm voice came into my mind, a voice that seemed to be the guru's but had a slightly warmer quality. "It's your life to live now. This learning is done for now."

I walked out of the meditation hall in quiet ecstasy. I had long ago thought of the first word I wanted to say, but I was surprised it came to my mind at the precise moment. It was a pristine forest morning, the sun was shining gorgeously, and I looked over into the eyes of the man walking out of the hall beside me. We were strangers, but as we made eye contact I felt I'd known him forever.

"Wow," he said, a grin stretching from ear to ear.

I smiled and spoke. "Rosebud."

## A CURE FOR THE COMMON CRAVING

Throughout the week the guru, whose name is Goenkaji (he wasn't physically there with us; we experienced his voice via a variety of video and audio recordings) taught us exhaustively about Buddhism, and his words were full of beauty and wisdom. I loved most of it and had doubts about some of it. I mention some of my thoughts further below, but one of the teachings that resonated like thunder in my mind throughout the week were his words on craving and aversion. These are our primary sources of suffering, he explained, and as I looked over all my relationships and ways of being in life, I saw countless ways this was true.

**The bliss of Day 10 continued.** We spoke with each other and shared insights and questions. Instead of an afternoon nap, I wrote for the first time in ten days. I was overcome with the desire to keep this wisdom fresh and new in my mind as I returned to the world, to keep the teachings about craving and aversion with me in every moment, and also to free myself again to live in a world full of huge sensations of pleasure and pain. So I wrote two poems -- for me to memorize so they might come to mind in the moment I found myself trapped in craving or aversion, pleasure or suffering. One is to remain awake during pleasure, the other to remain awake during suffering.

Here is Pleasure.

May I generate no craving to extend it now or recreate it later,  
May I enjoy it deeply,  
This is a road I travel only once.

Here is Suffering.

May I have no aversion to it,  
May I endure it bravely and patiently,  
This is a road I travel only once.



**Tony Brasunas** is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. His writings have been published in the San Francisco Chronicle, the San Francisco Bay Guardian, and elsewhere. He grew up the son of two vipassana meditators in West Virginia at Claymont, an intentional community dedicated to continuous inner learning.

### S.N.Goenka

Goenkaji, as he is known affectionately by many of his students, is a lay teacher of vipassana meditation in the lineage of the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin of Burma (Myanmar). The vipassana technique which S.N.Goenka teaches represents a tradition which can be traced back to King Asoka and to the Buddha.

Goenka has taught tens of thousands of people to meditate. Under his guidance, more than 120 residential meditation centers have been established around the world.

**V**ipassana, meaning the insight of seeing things as they really are, is one of India's most ancient meditation techniques. This style of vipassana meditation is quite possibly the oldest form of vipassana and that which was practiced by the Buddha himself. For more information about courses like this, which are offered at more than 120 residential centers around the world, go to [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org).

Below you will find the daily schedule that Tony and his fellow retreatants followed for ten days.

4:00 am	Morning wake-up bell
4:30–6:30 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30–8:00 am	Breakfast break
8:00–9:00 am	Group meditation in the hall
9:00–11:00 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions
11:00–12:00 noon	Lunch break
12noon–1:00 pm	Rest and interviews with the teacher
1:00–2:30 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30–3:30 pm	Group meditation in the hall
3:30–5:00 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your own room according to the teacher's instructions
5:00–6:00 pm	Tea break
6:00–7:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
7:00–8:15 pm	Teacher's Discourse in the hall
8:15–9:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
9:00–9:30 pm	Question time in the hall
9:30 pm	Retire to your own room--Lights out

