**Mitch Sullen’s Retreat report**

The retreat I attended September 17-28 was a Goenka retreat at the Dhamma Dhara Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne, MA. I think it was the 1st such Goenka-style meditation center in the US.

It is a beautiful center, with an attached spectacularly beautiful golden domed pagoda, in a lovely forested setting, with walking trails.

Unlike the Vipassana Meditation Center in Georgia, you don't have to go outside for anything, with all residences, dining, meditation halls, & pagoda cells accessible from inside the facility.

This was my 3rd 10-day Goenka retreat, all Black Heritage Retreats. The 1st such retreat was in 2021, at this same Massachusetts center. Two years later, in 2023, I attended my 2nd Black Heritage Retreat at the Georgia center.

I'm not sure who started the Black Heritage Retreats, but I understand they've spread to other Vipassana centers in the US.

The objective is to encourage, and allow for, such retreats to a growing number of Black folks to know and experience the benefits of the Dharma.

It's the same opportunity as any other Goenka Vipassana retreat, but with a whole lot more Black faces, than at most other retreats I have gone to over my 20 years of practice. It's a wonderful experience, as relief from misery is a universal need.

 It seemed to have taken this 3rd exposure to this mindfulness of the body, or Vipassana, "technique", as Goenka refers to it, for me to have a greater appreciation for what it offers.

Goenka has been dead since 2013, but he is still viewed as the "Teacher", with "Assistant Teachers", or ATs, leading each retreat, and providing guidance.

But all meditation sessions and discourses are done with audio & video recordings Goenka completed before he died. He has a sometimes hard to understand accent.

Because I was at the back of the meditation hall, & could not easily read the close captionings on the video discourses, I've spent a lot of time in the 2 weeks since the retreat reviewing the daily discourses, to enhance what I missed at the retreat. It's been very time-consuming, but very beneficial.

I'm going to try to explain the essence of what I've gained from this 3rd Goenka Vipassana retreat, then open it for questions any of you may have:

A) The retreat experience in essence, follows the Noble 8-Fold Path, starting with Sila (Morality), then Samadhi (Mastery of the mind), then Panya (Wisdom, Purification of the mind).

B) SILA (Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood), or Morality, involves the retreat being in Noble Silence, men & women separated, and committing to the Five Precepts. You're setting a base for removing/avoiding impurities & defilements at the start of the retreat.

C) SAMADHI (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness/Awareness, Right Concentration), or Mastery of the Mind, involves the first 3 days doing mindfulness of breathing, or Anapanasati, meditation, to calm and concentrate the mind, thru focus on the small triangular area from the nose to the area above the upper lip.

D) PANYA (Right View, Right Intentions), or Wisdom, Purification of the mind, begins on Day 4, or Vipassana Day, where the focus, for the rest of the retreat, is on an ever expanding mindfulness of the body meditation practice.

E) Goenka refers to this practice as a "deep surgical operation of one's own mind", without anesthesia! One must face all that arises with Strong Determination of the mind. It's how you ultimately allow for the change of deeply embedded Habit Patterns of the mind that are the cause of our misery.

F) He often said you have to fight your own battles, work out your own Salvation, Liberation. You have to take every step on the Path, as no one else can carry you. But you DO get support, grace, mercy, as you take ownership along the Path, towards the Final Goal.

G) Again, the 1st 3 days involves Observing the natural flow of the breath, just Bare Natural Breath, with Equanimity, & without regulating it, and without any visualizations or verbalizations.

H) Some meditation practices allow for such visualizations or verbalizations, and it can result in a calm and concentrated mind more easily and quickly.

I) But with this "Technique", concentration & quieting of the mind is not the final goal. Purification of the mind is, not just at the surface level, but at the deepest Root Level, allowing for the Natural Change of deeply rooted Behavior Patterns.

J) This practice sets the stage for one to truly "Know Thy Self", not just at the Devotional or Intellectual levels, but at the direct Experiential level. It's about identifying the physical and mental "structures" that creates the "I" and "mine", with the associated attachments, that cause misery.

K) The Technique helps one to know experiences from the Gross level, to progressively Subtler & Subtler levels of the mind and body. Ultimately, you can Know experiences beyond the mind & body, towards knowing True Peace, Happiness and Harmony at the Root Level, not just the surface level.

L) When you simply Observe the breath, moment to moment, with Equanimity, it prepares you for going deeper in observing Sensations, at a deeper & deeper level, where impurities of the mind, or Sankaras, will arise, & with continued Observation, with Equanimity, will eventually Dissolve.

M) On Day 4, Vipassana Day, the practice moves, for the rest of the retreat, to the 3rd part of the 8-Fold Path of Panya, or Wisdom, Insight, which nurtures Right View and Right Intentions.

N) Wisdom, Insight, Direct Experience of the Truth inside, and developing the wisdom of Universal Law, allows for changing the habit patterns of the mind at the deepest  level.

O) The Vipassana practice purifies the mind not just at the surface level, but at the deeper Root Level, in what he refers to as the "so called Unconscious". This is where all impurities originate, arise and multiply.

P) At the Experiential level, with patient, persistent training/taming of the mind, it becomes clearer and clearer how one cannot do unwholesome physical or verbal actions, unless one has generated impurities in one's own mind. You are the 1st victim of your own defilements/impurities.

Q) He points out there are 3 kinds of Wisdom: 1) Trust in what's said to you & what's read; 2) One's own intellectual understanding; & 3) One's Experiential understanding. This practice offers largely the 3rd type.

R) The retreat's mindfulness of the body, or Vipassana, practice, starts out with Observing any and all sensations in the body, gross or subtle, pleasant or unpleasant, progressively & slowly, with non-reactive objectivity, or Equanimity, from the top of the head, to the bottom of the feet, part by part. You observe each shoulder/arm/hand and each hip/leg/foot individually at the start.

S) Over the remaining days of the retreat, one goes from a slow progression one way, from head to feet, then from both ways, part by part. Later, the progression is still both ways & including both shoulders/arms/hands & hips/legs/feet at the same time.

T) The Vipassana practice ultimately moves on to a "body sweep", vs part by part. And the pacing gets faster. Throughout each sit, one "sweeps" thru the body fairly quickly in the areas with subtle sensations, but Observing Equanimously 1-2 minutes in areas with gross sensations.

U)  One can do all aspects of the Vipassana Meditation in any bodily order. Just do it in some order. And DO NOT jump from one sensation to another.

V) Goenka refers to the "4 parts of the mind as: 1) Consciousness (via the 6 senses), 2) Recognition, 3) Sensations, & 4) Reaction (or Sankaras).

W) The "so-called" unconscious, or root level of the mind, is not impacted so much by the 6-sense doors outside impact. It's impacted by Sensations.

It's important to Observe Misery as misery (the 1st Noble Truth), without Reaction.

X) The deeper level of the Mind, the unconscious, Habitually Reacts with craving & clinging, or aversion & hatred. While the surface, or Intellectual, level of the mind may understand how best to be or act in response, it exercises no actual control the blind, knee-jerk Habit Patterns.

Y) Goenka notes the 2nd Noble Truth-the real cause of the misery is within, not outside. You come to see how mental pain is layered onto physical pain, making it misery. The deeper, stronger the attachment, the deeper, stronger the misery, when things aren't as you desire. Attachment, clinging is bound to bring misery.

Z) You're experiencing your own direct wisdom of the reality of suffering (misery) via the Vipassana meditation, & working thru it directly with non-reactive, objective observation of whatever arises, pain or no pain.

AA) Beyond devoted Vipassana meditation, during daily activities (walking, eating, etc.), remain aware of sensations in the body areas of movement (legs, mouth, etc.). And while sleep is required for giving the body & mind rest from daily activities, even if one don't actually sleep, allowing the body to stay resting, and the mind to focus on sensations & staying equanimous, will allow for renewing rest.

BB) The 2 important aspects of the technique, Awareness & Equanimity, must be equal in size & strength, like 2 wings of a bird. He emphasizes how the 6 sense doors come in contact with respective outside objects. Then this contact starts bodily sensations of pleasant or unpleasant. Craving or Aversion starts after experience of these bodily sensations. Gautama's contribution was to emphasize the root level Vipassana practice, whereas there'd been only surface level practice up until then.

CC) The 10-day retreat starts with awareness in a small area, with mindfulness of breathing, allowing for sharpening of the mind beyond just gross sensations. It sets the stage for awareness of gross and/or subtle sensations any & everywhere in the body, with there being different levels of sensations everywhere in the body, all the time.

DD) With steady Vipassana practice, one goes thru stages of gross sensations to subtler and subtler pleasant flow of sensations. This CAN be dangerous if, without non-reactive equanimity, one falls back into old habit patterns of the mind, and resumes craving & clinging to such pleasant sensations. One must remember how ALL sensations are arising, then passing away, that NOTHING is "permanent". The "so-called" unconscious mind is always in touch with sensations, reacting to them as pleasant or unpleasant. Such deep level reactions, or sankaras, are Habit Patterns. Remaining equanimous with awareness of all sensations, pleasant, unpleasant, gross, subtle, will slow/stop the "multiplication" of sankaras, allowing them to come to the surface, and be eradicated/evaporated.

EE) Vipassana can be an art of living, so incorporating it in one's daily life can be powerful. Diverting one's attention from negativity that has arisen, either with sensual pleasure (like drinking, etc.), devotion to a god/goddess/teacher/etc., only suppresses the associated sensation, pushing it deeper into one's unconscious, but not resolving it. One must observe it, with equanimity.

FF) When strong negativity arises, two things happen at the physical level: 1) At the gross level, your breathing changes; 2) At the subtler level, a biochemical reaction starts, with heat, tension, palpitations, perspiration. Here, one must observe respiration, and sensation, not the object of the negativity. Facing the respiration and sensation is not avoidance or distraction. It's facing the internal process the negativity has engendered, versus looking outward at the external object of one's negativity. You cannot change others, only your own reactions.

GG) Goenka spoke again about the 4 parts of the mind of Cognizing, Recognizing, Feelings, and Reacting. He pointed out that in looking at one's misery, you see the "Reacting" part to be stronger, the "Cognizing" weaker. This flips with Vipassana practice. He later noted that we react to "images we carve".

HH) The last thing I want to note from the extensive discourses, is Goenka's emphasis that all sensations, pleasant or unpleasant, arise and pass away. One's actual experience via Vipassana allows one to let go of habit patterns at the depth level, not the intellectual or surface level. And although the objective is to not react with craving or aversion at all, much practice may be required to come to that point. So, it's okay to catch oneself after the fact of a reaction, and as quickly as possible, & with compassion, recognize that "this too will pass".