

100 Hours of Silence

by Owen Poindexter, for *The Campanil*

An insect clung to the top of a blade of grass with six miniscule claws. Its green and white body was the length of my fingernail, and barely any thicker. I grinned and my heart beat faster—this was such a find. The way its body was so perfectly fitted to hug a single grass blade thrilled me to no end. For days, I had not spoken, written, read, made meaningful gestures or used any electronics. Call it heightened senses or lower standards, but seeing that bug made my afternoon.

I was at the Vipassana meditation retreat, a course offered on a donation basis at over 120 permanent locations worldwide, including Massachusetts, where I was, and three centers in California. Wherever one takes the course, the structure is the same: ten hours of meditation a day for ten days. This, I felt sure, would give me a handle on the ultimate determinant of my happiness: my mind.

The way I saw it, my mind decided whether I tapped out fresh pages of my novel or challenged my computer to another pointless game of hearts; whether I spent a party chatting up beer-holding strangers and friends or nervously hoping that no one noticed I wasn't talking to anyone; whether my night alone left me content with a book or desperately surfing channels for a distraction. These differences, so essential to my fulfillment, seemed to come down to my mental state. Vipassana, I hoped, would give me the control to be confident, productive and peaceful.

Before signing up for the course, I spent idle moments staring at its daily schedule in the fluorescent light and procrastination-bathed computer lab at Oberlin College. Wake up at 4 in the morning, 2 hours of meditation, breakfast, 3 hours of meditation, lunch, 4 hours of meditation, snack, 1 hour of meditation, taped lecture, 1 hour of meditation. Yikes.

After a month of internal debate, I said to myself, it's only ten days. Ten days comes and goes. You get wrapped up in what you're doing, and then you look up to see the end is already approaching. I signed up.

There was a problem with this calculation: the days I knew were measured in hours. I was used to time that vanished like thinly spread water. In silence, however, with no conversation, no tasks to accomplish, no television, music or internet, with the narrowing of my experience to include my own mind and very little else, time barely had any obligation to move at all.

Consider the moment when someone starts to say a word, and you mentally anticipate what it will be, but as the person pronounces the remaining letters, you realize that the word is not the one you expected. That experience gives you a glimpse of mind time, and how it breaks moments into smaller and smaller units, such that you can have several thoughts in the time it takes to say one word. To spend most of the day in mind time is to be stuck in Xeno's paradox: every second can be divided in half, and that half in half, and that quarter in half, and.... The hours of meditation sitting cross-legged on my thin, auburn cushion, in the sparse, dimly lit meditation hall, dripped by, one second at a time.

The first third of the course developed awareness for the minutest sensations that exist as background noise throughout our bodies, all the time. We were instructed to focus all of our

attention on the square of skin between the nose and upper lip. My world did not collapse, I experienced the mustache area as gigantic and all-encompassing.

After a few days of silence, my mind became a very peculiar place: an empty warehouse with just a few boxes pushed against a wall. Sensations had room to echo and resonate. Songs got stuck in my head, and I could hear them with bizarre clarity. From the tea room, where we had our evening snack, a large window looked out onto a garden. Though it was July, Massachusetts had retained enough chill that the flowers were mostly closed at the start of the course. Gradually over the first few days, they bent the tips of their petals open, until on the fifth day, they erupted into full bloom. It was like watching fireworks in a suspended explosion.

After three days of focusing only on the area between the nose and upper lip, we were instructed to expand our attention to our entire bodies, scanning from head to toe, then toe to head for any blips of sensation.

By the sixth day, I could tell how long I'd been sitting by the aching in my knees. The end of the course was still far away, and thinking about it seemed to nudge it farther. My favorite hockey team was in the finals that year, and instead of watching them, I was trapped in hour upon hour of trying and mostly failing to wrangle my pinball-esque mind. I entered into the morning stretch from 8 to 11 weary, and weary of feeling weary.

Then, somewhere in there, everything clicked. Sensations sparkled up and down my body like sheets of rain. The return trip from feet to head, normally more of a struggle for some reason, was completed in a breath. Even my knees felt healed. My breath, which had been embarrassingly wheezy at points, cleared up. The session ended and I went outside to see that the

sun had conquered the cloak of clouds that had covered the previous days. I lay in the grass basking in total peace.

I suspect I already knew that I didn't have the discipline to do the daily work required to return to that state with any regularity. The changes I had dreamed of before the course were unrealistic, at least for me, at least then. That said, the premise of the journey had been confirmed: my mind, isolated from everything but itself, had led me to bliss.