

## How not to do a Goenka Vipassana retreat: a gigantic story by Melissa Maples



Well... I appear to be back. Back where, I'm not completely sure yet.

I don't even know where to begin.

The first time I saw *Eyes Wide Shut* I marveled at the fact that Kubrick managed to start at point A, and just when it seemed that the road to point C was leading straight through B, all of a sudden you were instead on the road from Q to Andromeda... and at the end of the film the whole thing seemed like the freakiest acid trip ever, and you looked around at the fact that somehow you managed to end up at C anyway, but no one would believe the route you took to get there.

I'm just now pulling into the station at C, but I haven't quite processed all the stuff between Q and Andromeda yet.

Anyway, I'm talking in riddles now, which I kind of knew was going to happen if I started writing about this so soon after the fact; nonetheless I felt that hiding in my room for five more days and pretending not to exist was just one extra level of

surreality the situation didn't need. And I can't guarantee that I could explain things any better next week anyway.

So sit tight, ahead there be pharmaceuticals and zombies. And cats, lots and lots of cats.

Wednesday night we waited for the shuttle to the bus station, and of course the shuttle was late so I panicked, but eventually we got to the station and I managed to make my bus to Erdek just in time. Emirhan asked the bus steward to keep an eye on me, which he did, and it was all very uneventful. I tried to listen to my iPod for a while, but within about half an hour I was asleep.

Of course I woke up many times during the night, but eventually I woke up for good in Bursa, which was about two hours from my final destination of Erdek. That whole part



of the country is lots of mountains and peninsula-type things that jut out into the Sea of Marmara. Pretty, but not terribly interesting after the first half hour.

We arrived in Erdek at 10:00. It's about the same size as Kemer, which is what I expected, but it's more downmarket, sort of like if you thought you were going to Miami Beach but found

yourself in Blackpool instead. Erdek is basically shaped like male genitals— the town itself is pretty much round, and then there's this long phallic strip of beach that extends out and away from the town, and that's where the hotels are. The hotel where the retreat was, as it turned out, was way the hell out near the tip of the penis. It took me about an hour to walk from the bus station (which is in the centre of the scrotum) to the hotel, my heavy bags in tow. In my head I turned this into some contrived “carrying my burden” symbolism that only worked for about ten minutes before I was fed up and wished I'd taken a taxi.

I realised on my way to the hotel that I had no reason to worry about the noise level or staying away from tourists: Erdek clearly closes down its penis in September. There was literally not one hotel or restaurant open on the strip. It was like a ghost town. In the hour it took me to get to the hotel, I literally did not see any people save for two fisherman who were out in a boat about a hundred metres offshore. What I did see, however, were lots of cats. Tons of them, mostly friendly, and lots of mothers with kittens. So of course I wasted some time being Crazy Cat Lady. I had packed some snacks in one of my bags, so I proved to be very popular indeed (eventually I ended up wishing I'd saved that food for myself, but we'll get to that later).

By the time I finally came upon the hotel, I already had that sort of horror-film bad feeling about the place... quiet, end of summer, resort on the water, pretty much abandoned, no one going to come out here for months, add a small group of young people plus an old hotel with a pier and ten days of isolation and you pretty much have the recipe for a slasher flick. But in any case the hotel seemed okay, and when I got there one of the organisers greeted me and said that I was the first one to arrive and they were still getting things ready. I told her I was hoping to leave my



bags there and find a restaurant, as I hadn't eaten for almost a day. She told me what I'd already figured out, that all the restaurants on the penis were closed for the season, and I'd have to go back down to the scrotum if I wanted a meal. She said there was a bus into town, but I never saw it, and I ended up walking back instead, which only took about half the time without my bags. Once I was in town I had a sucuk-and-cheese pide for my final non-vegetarian meal, did a little wandering around, and then decided I was too lazy to walk back. I took a taxi, but soon regretted it as it cost a whopping nine million, which is about twice what an equivalent journey would have cost in Antalya.

Soon after I arrived back at the hotel (shortly after noon) all the other participants arrived in a group. They'd rented a bus and driven down from Istanbul. It was clear that they all knew each other, and they knew the organisers. They were also all Turkish (except for one American guy whom I'll get to soon). I was pretty much the only outsider. I didn't have a bad feeling about *that* per se, but I did have a nagging bad feeling about the whole thing in general. The group seemed very self-contained and... cohesive, almost like a big love-in commune thingy. They were mostly neo-hippie types, young with dreds and tie-dye and nose rings and hemp backpacks with peace symbols sewn on them. There were a couple of old, legitimate hippies thrown in for good measure. There were several couples within the group, which made me wish Emirhan was there for backup.

It was soon after this big group arrived that I started getting the creeps. Not just feeling left out, but... I don't know, creeped. I phoned Emirhan to ask what he thought; he laughed and said that although the situation wasn't ideal, within a few hours everyone would shut up and be in their own little meditation worlds and everything would even out. I still felt weird about it, but I accepted that Emirhan was a lot more objective than I could be, and we said our final goodbyes before I shut my phone down for what I believed would be ten days.

We were given an hour or so to wander around outside, because we were told that we would not be allowed any access to the beach once the retreat started. This seemed odd to me, because from what I'd read about other Goenka retreats, part of the point of being in an isolated area is that generally the landscape is relaxing and pretty, and one can wander around outside during break periods without danger of running into anyone. So I felt that keeping us locked in the hotel was not only an unnecessary control measure, it was a waste of a good empty beach. Nonetheless, that was the rule, and no one was forcing anyone to sign up.

After our hour was up we were given booklets with course guidelines, and told to read them through thoroughly before filling out the attached course registration form. The booklet was pretty much a more detailed version of the [Code of Discipline](#) available on the internet, so no surprises there. I filled out the registration form and handed it in. No biggie.

Then we were each handed medium-sized manila envelopes, much like the ones you see in prison television dramas, to put our personal effects in. We were told to refer to the handbook's list of forbidden items for guidelines on what to include in the envelope. Basically for most people it ended up being phones and iPods. For me it was phone, iPod, and camera. I also had my PowerBook with me, but since it was way too big for the envelope and it wasn't specifically listed in the guidebook as forbidden (though I later figured out it fell into the "electronic writing tools" category), I didn't mention it and just left it in my backpack. I wasn't planning on using it anyway, and I thought if I got caught with it I could make the excuse that it wasn't on the list and I didn't know.

I had my only real panic pang during this handing-things-over ritual. Turning stuff in wasn't a surprise; I'd known from the beginning that we'd be expected to fork over the electronics. I think what happened is that I realised for the first time that one of my biggest fears is going to prison. I don't think I knew that about myself before. And this felt like checking into prison. I realised, though, that this was my own hang-up and not any fault of the organisers.

During the retreat one of the things we're required to promise is that we will not lie or deceive anyone for the duration of the course. I figured this was a given since we wouldn't be allowed to speak, but as it turned out I was already being deceptive—I kept several forbidden items in my bag and didn't hand them in, including my cash (40 million), bank card, passport, ring, and photo of Emirhan. I wasn't entirely sure the photo was forbidden, but I didn't chance asking. I was already missing him, so I just kept the picture. I asked the girl who was collecting the manila envelopes where they were planning on keeping them, and she said that the hotel had a big safe in the office and the envelopes would be locked in the safe. This seemed reasonable to me, so I wrote my name on my envelope and handed it over. Bye-bye phone.

Next we were assigned rooms. This was done by one of the organisers calling out each name followed by a number. I was almost the last one to be called, and my number was 36. I grabbed my bags and headed upstairs to find out who my roommates would be, and I was figuring that since I was probably the last one to arrive at room 36, I'd have to live with the crappiest bed. But whatever, it's not supposed to be a holiday.

So imagine my surprise when I opened the door to 36 and discovered only a man in there, putting clean sheets on one of the beds. He noticed my confused look and laughed and explained that he was one of the organisers and had slept in this room the previous night, so he thought he'd

change the sheets before handing the room over to me. I asked about the other girls. He asked which girls I meant. Well, any of the girls. All of them. Whatever. He wrinkled his brow and said, “well, I supposed they’re in their own rooms, of course.”

Woah, private rooms? Sweet. That was an unexpected luxury. I hate sharing with people I don’t know.

Then the guy said that there was time to settle in and relax until 18:00, which gave me about four hours to unpack and shower and rest, and then at 18:00 there would be a bell to signify dinner, and we should come down to the outdoor dining area (which was just a big covered porch) for our meal and orientation. Fine. When the guy was on his way out I asked him for the key to the room, but he said, “no, we don’t lock doors here.”

Um, we don’t? Mmmmkay. Glad I brought the cable lock for my laptop.

The view from my balcony was amazing. I was lucky enough to have a sea view, which not everyone got, and I was on the top floor, which was even better. I enjoyed looking out while I was unpacking, and then I had a shower and relaxed on the balcony for a while. Since I was way up on the top floor in a corner, I was slightly worried I wouldn’t hear the dinner bell, but as it turns out a guy walks through the halls and up and down the stairs ringing the bell, and it’s a big bell, so it was difficult to miss.

Dinner was a surprise in that it was absolutely awful. In almost all of the accounts I’ve read of Goenka retreats, nearly everyone says that the food is wonderful. Perhaps this is only true in North America, where people won’t tolerate bad food and will actually leave an event if the buffet’s not up to scratch. Our dinner consisted of... I guess it was supposed to be soup. Okay, here’s the recipe: take a pitcher of drinking water, regular standard water. Now, cut up a zucchini and place the slices in the water. Finally, stick the pitcher in the microwave for two minutes to make it slightly warm. Pour into bowls and serve.

I’m not exaggerating. There was not one grain of salt, not even any salt shakers on the table, and nothing was hot. The “soup” was served with bread, and let me tell you, I ate a ton of that bread. So did everyone else. Unfortunately there wasn’t really enough and they ran out of bread way before they ran out of “soup.”

Then they served tea, which I got really excited about, and then it turned out not to be tea at all but rather mint leaves soaked in warm water. Ugh. I had exactly one sip of that and then left the rest. My heart sank.

After “dinner” came the orientation, during which they basically went over the Code of Discipline yet again, and they explained a few other rules (“you must keep your clothes on when in public areas”— what incident led them to having to make a specific rule about this?). After the rules were read we were given one more chance to leave. No one did. Then they gave us a fifteen-minute warning before the Noble Silence started and the boys would be separated from the girls. I didn’t really have anyone to talk to anyway, but most of the couples spent this time making out and having final conversations. It just so happened that where I was sitting, I could hear a conversation between the American guy and one of the young Turkish girls. He was getting pretty pathetic, and she was cool and aloof. She was saying things like, “look, right now I’m just here to do a meditation retreat” and he was saying things like, “but we totally have a connection, you feel it, right? I mean, you must feel it. I mean, we totally click. It’s obvious we have something special.” He was nodding enthusiastically and she was shrugging and looking out at the sea. It was almost painful to watch, because I got the feeling that I was listening to him more than she was.

Mercifully one of the organisers stopped the embarrassment by coming in and announcing that they would now assign seats in the meditation hall, and we would keep the same seats throughout the retreat. I was placed near the back of the right half of the room, next to the centre aisle. What surprised me was that girls were on one side of the room and boys on the other. I was

under the impression that the whole point of sex segregation was that the men and women would never see each other. Certainly all the other reports I read said that men and women had separate meditation halls, separate dining, separate everything. So it seemed silly to me to go through the trouble of separating us if we were going to be segregated some of the time but not all the time. As it turned out, right across the aisle from me, about two feet away to my left, was the American guy. I don't think he knew I was also American because I'd barely said anything to anyone since I'd arrived.

The meditation hall was nicer than I expected, and very comfortable. The cushions were lovely, and everything looked and smelled clean. After they seated everyone, one of the organisers came in and announced that the teacher's name was Anna Hartmann, and she would be overseeing the first sitting. Then Hartmann entered the room. She was an Austrian woman in her fifties. She sat on the raised dais in the front of the room, and at that point I expected her to... well, start teaching. But instead she opened a bag she had slung over her shoulder, took out a few CDs, chose one, popped it into the CD player, and pressed play. Then she sat there quietly like the rest of us and listened.

Now, I already knew that Goenka himself teaches a lot of the course via CDs and videos, so I let it go at the time, but as it turned out *all* the teaching is done via CD and video. The actual live teacher does nothing but press play and answer any questions you might have. Over the next twenty-four hours several things kept popping into my head:

1. What exactly is the point of bringing a live teacher in from Austria if the recordings do all the teaching? I've read that the "teachers" are actually quality and uniformity control officers, just making sure everything is kept to Goenka's standards, but if that's true, Hartmann did a really poor job, because Golden Rule Number One is that men and women should never lay eyes on one another for the duration of the retreat;
2. Seeing as the recordings (both audio and video) are readily available on the internet, and part of the point of the retreat is to be as isolated as possible, and the live teacher doesn't actually do anything, wouldn't it make more sense as a meditator to just load the recordings up on your iPod and head out alone into the woods for ten days with a backpack full of food?;
3. There has to be a reason that this is done by recording rather than the less expensive method of giving the teacher a script and letting her read it. There must be some specific reason it has to be Goenka's voice and not someone else's. I had an inkling what that reason might be, and after listening to the first group session CD I was pretty sure I was right: hypnosis. Now, I'm not a doctor of psychology, but I have taken courses at a university level, and there are certain techniques Goenka uses in his speech that fit in perfectly with what I know about how hypnosis works. I wasn't completely convinced he was hypnotising people, but I definitely decided to keep my awareness open.

Thing is, it's very difficult to relax and meditate when you're looking out for tricks, so the actual Vipassana was difficult for me to settle down to. That's no one's fault but my own.

A funny thing happened that first evening— in the meditation hall, not ten minutes after we all took an oath not to engage in any killing, a giant mosquito landed on my left cheek, and without thinking I slapped it and it pretty much exploded all over my face and hand. So there I was, sitting on my meditation cushion with the bloody evidence of my brutal murder splattered on my cheek and fingers. I had to try really hard not to laugh out loud. I leaned forward so my hair would cover my face somewhat, and I relied on the hope that no one would see since we weren't supposed to

make eye contact with each other. I did, however, actually laugh out loud when I got back to my room and saw just how bad my face really looked, bug parts and blood everywhere. It was gross, but it was funny, because I'd already broken three of the five oaths before the first day was even finished.

Lights-out bell rang at 21:00, and I fell exhausted into bed. I really wanted to run away in the middle of the night, but they had my iPod and phone and camera locked away. Or so I thought.

The second day was pretty much variations on a theme. All the times we had solitary meditation I felt great and did really well; all the times we had group sittings with the recordings I ended up confused and zoned out and questioning myself. I realised what was going on pretty early on that second day, but was confused and tired enough that I didn't manage to pull it together enough to get out of there until over a day later.

The 04:00 wake-up bell came way too early (I discovered later this was not just my imagination). I was not even close to being well-rested. There was a two-hour meditation from 04:30 until 06:30, for which the timetable said, "meditate in the hall or in your room." I went down to the hall because I thought they'd at least expect us to check in, but as it turned out only a few of the girls actually showed up (though most of the boys were there). The "teacher" wasn't there, because this wasn't an official group sitting, so theoretically I would have been really happy to stay there and meditate without the help of the recordings, but I was so sleepy and hungry that I had no energy, and eventually went back to my room when it became clear that we didn't actually have to be there. I figured if I could get a couple more hours of sleep, I'd feel a lot better.

I slept until the breakfast bell, at which point I went downstairs to discover that there wasn't enough breakfast to feed everyone. Or rather, there would have been enough breakfast if everyone had just taken a miniscule portion, but the first three or four people took a normal-sized portion and that left about six slices of cucumber and two pieces of cheese to feed the other twelve of us. I was starting to feel a strange competition with the other students about the food thing, and made the resolution to be first down the stairs for the lunch bell.

After breakfast there was an hour's break followed by a group sitting. I didn't sleep during the break because I didn't think there was enough time to get a decent nap in, but I did have a quick shower, thinking I would have about forty minutes to spare after that.

One of the organisers, Ceren, knocked on my door while I was still in the bathroom. I answered the door in my towel. She asked if I was planning on coming for the group sitting. Well, yes, of course. She then told me that I was late and I was only allowed to shower during break times. I was very confused and told her that I hadn't heard the bell, and furthermore the break was an hour long and it had only been about ten minutes so far. She shook her head and said she'd rung the bell right in front of my door and she didn't know how I hadn't heard it, and that break time ended at 8:00 and I must have just lost track of time. Bewildered, I put some clothes on and went down for the group sitting. I was certain she had the time wrong and that furthermore she hadn't rung the bell, but as I had no clock I had no way to prove it. I did notice, however, that I wasn't the last one downstairs— several people arrived after me. So I guess I wasn't the only one who missed the bell. Something smelled fishy.

The group sitting recording put me in a haze again, and I lost track of all the thoughts I'd had about things that had seemed not quite right. I felt confused and tired and hungry and frustrated. Some people fell asleep during the sitting and a couple of people were caught snoring. I noticed that the girl who had been sitting to my right wasn't there, and I wondered if she gave up and went home (I guess she did, because she never came back). I was starting to think she had the right idea, but as much as I wanted to pack my bag I couldn't pull myself together, and instead I went back to my room for a short nap. While I was waiting to fall asleep I heard an unmistakable

sound— a polyphonic ringtone. A fellow smuggler! And a stupid one who forgot to put her phone on silent. How I wish I'd been smart enough to bring a second phone with me.

I woke up in a panic some time later thinking that I must have overslept, because it felt like I'd been out for a long time. I was worried because the next bell would have been the lunch bell, and I sure as hell didn't want to miss whatever small amount of food would be offered. I thought I could live without a clock, but the problem is once you've missed one bell you get paranoid that you'll miss other bells. I was so confused and worried that I couldn't help myself— I opened my computer to check the time. 10:41. Lunch bell wouldn't ring for another twenty minutes. While I had the computer open I couldn't resist checking for a wireless network, but duh, no.

As I started to wake up, once again I felt better and more clear-headed. From my balcony I could see a couple standing out on the pier, holding hands. I envied them, and I wished I hadn't turned in my camera. Such a great view from the balcony!

Out of curiosity I left my computer open, and noticed that the 11:00 lunch bell didn't actually ring until 11:12. Interesting. I slid the computer under the bed, cable-locked it to the bed frame, and went down to the dining hall.

My heart sank at seeing what would be the last meal of the day— pale, watery tomato soup, wilted salad, and a brown paste that looked like it may have been lentils in a previous incarnation. Yogurt was served on the side.

The only nice surprise was salt shakers on the table, glass ones that let you see how much salt is inside, but there was only a small bit of salt in the bottom... not enough for everyone. One has to think that was intentional, but I can't figure out why. I noticed some people eyeing the salt shakers like they might break the no-stealing rule. I didn't go that far, but I did make sure I got to the salt before most people noticed it was there. It made the soup almost palatable, and I discovered the brown lentil paste was quite good with salt and yogurt.

I noticed there were fewer plates at lunch, and the room seemed less crowded. Had some people gone home?

After the meal (which was more the size of a snack, and I was still pretty hungry afterward), I went back up to my balcony. A woman riding by on her bike gave the hotel a strange look as she passed it and nearly lost her balance, which made me wonder what they had done to the outside of the hotel. The weather was lovely and cool and I wondered briefly if it would be possible to sneak out of the hotel at night and have a walk on the beach. I was sure if I did I'd find some smokers out there. I noticed some people turned in their cigarettes on the first day; I bet they were regretting that decision later, especially since the nearest market was about an hour's walk away and would probably be closed by the time anyone got there. That's if one did manage to sneak out after lights-out.

The second group sitting of the day was interesting. The first thing was, they rang the bell almost fifteen minutes early (this became a pattern, break periods being shorter than advertised and meditation periods being stretched), and then while the Goenka recording was playing I burst into tears and couldn't stop. I couldn't concentrate on anything except unhappiness, and I couldn't even pinpoint a reason (but it's difficult to make sense of anything when you're exhausted and hungry). I put my fingers in my ears to block out Goenka's voice. No one noticed because they all had their eyes closed, some taking naps... except for the American guy, who was watching me plug my ears and shook his head in disbelief. "What the fuck is this shit?" he mouthed to me, pointing at the CD player. I have no clue, but it's not the same Vipassana I've been practicing for the past year. I've been doing my regular Vipassana in my room during the solitary sittings, and have not had any adverse reactions, just the normal feeling of calm well-being. It's only when I hear the recordings in the group sittings that everything goes weird.

After the group sitting I went upstairs to wash my face, and discovered the water wasn't working. Typical. The electricity had been off and on several times already, so I figured the water

was just as unreliable (which is not unusual for a small Turkish town). Nonetheless, I thought I'd mention it to someone, because some hotels have reserve wells they can use if needed.

When I went downstairs I found Ceren, the organiser who'd scolded me for missing the morning session bell, sitting in the hotel office. I asked if I could speak to her, she invited me in, and I told her the water was out. She nodded and said, "yes, yours is."

Excuse me?

She then said, "you'll have to let me know when you need the water for something, and if it's an appropriate time I'll switch it on for you."

*Excuse* me?

Ceren explained that sometimes students have trouble with punctuality, and need help getting to sessions on time. Since I clearly didn't realise how long my showers were taking and was late to the morning session because of that, she thought it might be helpful for me if there was a "more structured approach to shower times." In other words, if I wanted to shower, I'd have to ask permission, and if she felt there was sufficient time she would turn the water on briefly for me.

I sat there with my mouth open. I wanted so badly to point out that I was on to their little trick of ringing the session start bells early and the break bells late, but then of course I'd have to give away the fact that I had my computer with me. I also didn't say anything because I knew of several empty unlocked rooms, and I figured I could just shower in one of those and let them wonder why I hadn't asked to have my water turned on. I really started to feel a very prison-like us-against-them mentality. All I said was, "I see, ok," and I went back to my room. At that point I knew for sure I had to get out of there, and I asked myself why I wasn't going right that second. I was so hungry and tired I couldn't think of any reasons, but I also couldn't get it together enough to pack. I felt weak and confused. I told myself I wanted to go to at least one of the evening discourses, during which a video presentation would be shown. Others have described these sessions as the highlight of the retreat. So I told myself I'd stay for the discourse, and then after that when everyone was heading to bed I'd pack my bag, ask for my phone and stuff back, and go. Bedtime was at 21:00 and most cross-country buses leave between 22:00 and midnight, so I thought the timing would be perfect.

The evening discourse didn't bring many surprises. I expected Goenka to say things to quell doubts, and that's exactly what he did. He said, "the first day is very hard, you want to run away, and a few people will run away, but that is because they are weak-minded."

Cult, anyone? That's right, tell people they're strong for staying and doing as you say, weak if they make their own decision and leave.

He then likened the Vipassana process to a mental surgical procedure. "We are the doctors and we are also the patients," he said. "We have to cut our own mind open without anaesthetic, and then as soon as we cut it open the pus starts bubbling up. Our instinct is to panic and run away, because breaking ourselves down and seeing the emotional disease is not pleasant, but we know if we don't clean this wound out and sew it back up it will never heal. This is what Vipassana does."

Mmmm, I'd have to give partial credit for that explanation— I do agree that Vipassana, if practiced consistently and with dedication, will act like a gradual "surgery of the mind" over a period of months or even years. But we're all far too novice (or at least I am) at the technique to expect that to have happened as dramatically as it appears to have done at this early stage. No, what I would say is happening is that the Vipassana is doing its normal gradual Vipassana thing (which at this first step in our meditation careers would have very little measurable effect aside from some general feelings of well-being and relaxation), but what is actually breaking us down in such a dramatic fashion is the addition to the Vipassana of some sort of group hypnosis, plus the fact that we're not eating enough, we're not sleeping enough, we're not exercising, we're not allowed to communicate in any meaningful way with anyone we trust (or indeed with anyone at all), and because we've been

taken out of the context of the real world we've lost our foothold on reality and we have no framework on which to base our current experiences. So it doesn't surprise me that we're all feeling a bit crazy and broken, but I don't think the cause of the craziness is the Vipassana. I think if you take anyone and deprive them of food, sleep, and human contact, they'll become very weak-minded and open to suggestion, and you could throw some legitimate meditation in on the side and claim the *meditation* is what's fucking with their heads, and they'd be so weary and exhausted they'd probably believe you if you seemed calm and in control (which Goenka does consistently without fail).

So, to clarify, I think there is plenty of actual Vipassana going on at these retreats, but I believe it's a smoke screen at best. I think Goenka (or at least some of Goenka's followers) are using the Vipassana as a cover for other practices that would obviously cause great physical and emotional upheaval (sleep and sensory deprivation, starvation, a sense of competition for food, isolation, possible hypnosis), and passing that upheaval off as "part of what Vipassana does at the beginning," when in fact Vipassana on its own wouldn't do that for a long, long time. But starvation and lack of sleep would do it pretty damned quickly indeed.

Goenka then warned against overeating at lunch because a full stomach causes drowsiness and lack of attention. The first thing I thought was, *jesus, who here could possibly be in danger of overeating?* The second thing I thought was, *good, maybe tomorrow people will eat less and I can have enough for once.* I felt very competitive, and then I reminded myself that my plan was to leave *tonight*, not tomorrow. I could eat something at the bus station.

After the discourse there was one final group sitting, and once again the recording left me confused and disoriented. I was also tremendously exhausted, and when the bell rang for bedtime I told myself that it wouldn't hurt me to get some sleep, and I'd leave first thing in the morning. I did realise that I kept putting off leaving, but I didn't feel like I was in complete control of what I was doing. I struggled up to bed and I don't even remember falling asleep.

On the third day I actually used my computer to write down some thoughts. Oddly, as you'll see, it took me a long damned time, about nine hours, to remember that my goal was to leave. Here is the text file I wrote in its entirety, unedited (all typos and grammatical errors are reprinted as is):

Almost 09:00 now. Felt somewhere between neutral and defeated this morning. 30 seconds after the wake-up bell at 04:00 (which was actually at 03:47) the electricity went out, came back, went out again, came back. Of course I went back to bed, too tired to do morning meditation. Slept 20 minutes past the breakfast bell, woke at 6:50 to find the electricity out again. Stumbled down to breakfast in the dark, couldn't work out what everything was but it all kind of looked as inadequate as yesterday, and same as yesterday there wasn't much. The lack of light made it only slightly less of a mystery, so I decided to skip breakfast altogether. I hope lunch is as hearty as yesterday. I must be defeated if yesterday's lunch is my definition of "hearty."

People have said that a Vipassana course will give you strange dreams, but on the contrary my dreams so far have been very literal representations of my hopes and fears. The first night I dreamed that Emirhan was here and I was really happy we were doing this together. Last night I dreamed that they started moving extra people into my room and someone discovered I had a computer.

I don't feel any particular dedication to this thing one way or the other, as evidenced by my having slept through the first meditation session this morning. I've decided to skip showering today because I don't smell bad, and anyway there's

no water in my room. It's not like I'm going to be close enough to anyone to smell me anyway. I'd better shut the computer down now, no idea how long the electricity will be out. If this place really is like Kemer it might be several days.

09:45 Still no electricity so I'll keep this short. The morning group session started out okay, but then after about... oh I'd guess forty minutes, you could tell people were fed up with it— lots of fidgeting, coughing, whatever. I kept thinking the hour should have been up by now, and when I finally gave up and opened my eyes I noticed that quite a few people were asleep, and others were looking around, as I was, and not concentrating. It then occurred to me that Anna Hartmann has no way of actually telling time, she doesn't have a watch on, she's just guessing how long an hour is, and she guessed really wrong this morning. Maybe she was asleep, too.

Then, the worst— just when I was expecting the break before lunch, she tells us to take a five-minute breather and *come back*. Shit. Luckily, we only sat and meditated for about ten minutes before she said that the male students would stay, and the girls could go. Thank god for that. On my way back to my room I noticed one of the kitchen guys setting out soup bowls. I can't wait for lunch. I want to sleep, but on the other hand I don't want to miss the lunch bell. I'd set an alarm on the computer, but I don't want to leave it running for an hour with no electricity. Must conserve battery. It'll be interesting to see how they handle tonight if the electricity doesn't come back. This morning we managed the CDs by putting batteries in the boom box, but this evening we'll need the television, and as far as I know our television won't run on batteries, and neither will the DVD player.

By the way, it looks like I'm not the only one who has failed to bathe— lots of people still wearing the same clothes as when they arrived. Ha, hippies. Anyway, better shut down now.

10:14 The electricity just came back.

10:54 So hungry, going down to lunch now, don't care that the bell hasn't rung yet.

11:30 It is really depressing when you're so damned hungry and then when it's finally time to eat there isn't enough food, and what is there is terrible. Things are starting to seriously break down already, socially. I went to lunch five minutes before the bell and there were already six people waiting in the dining hall. Most were pacing in front of the serving table and a couple of them looked like they were ready to take anyone down who got between them and the food. But most just looked broken, staring blankly at the wall as they paced, mouths gaping open in some cases. I feel kind of like that too, but unlike yesterday, today I think I'm managing to be more normal than most. I'm not crying anymore, anyway, but I'm not sure if that's an improvement or just a change.

Lunch today was wilted salad (mine even had a hair in it today, bonus), undercooked (almost crunchy) chickpeas in a kind of tomato sauce, rice, and bread. The rice was the highlight, but there wasn't enough to go around, even after they brought out a second small bowl of it. As usual nothing was salted, and now we're down to the point where there's only enough salt left in the shakers for maybe another day or so. I can see people looking at the salt shakers like they're

about to give up on the no-stealing precept and hide one for themselves. I'm not that desperate for the salt, but I'd love to have my phone or my camera (phone more than camera).

Unfortunately there was only that crappy mint "tea" to drink after lunch, and the sugar bowl was empty so the tea was even less palatable than usual. I took mine upstairs, had one sip, and poured the rest down the sink in disgust. And that's our last meal of the day, nothing else until tomorrow. Others I've read have said that the food was the highlight of their retreat, definitely not the case here.

So now I'm sitting looking out my balcony. It's actually quite warm this afternoon, maybe as high as 20, so I've opened up the doors and windows and I'm looking out at the pier. I don't have to be in any session for another 2.5 hours and I'm not particularly sleepy at the moment. I've been thinking a lot about how this technique works (Goenka's technique, not Vipassana), and I think the conclusion I've come to is that the meditation itself is a distraction to keep our minds off the fact that the real reason we're going nuts is because we're not eating enough, we're not sleeping enough, we're not exercising, we're not communicating, we're not allowed to leave, and we have no sensory input. It's leading to a prison mentality where we have no choice but to do what we're told and we have to fight for food. But if it's mind control, to what end? They let us go after ten days, and the course is free, so there's no wallet rape. Perhaps enough people donate and keep coming back that Goenka can feed his ego. Not sure.

You know, something weird is that when I think about breakfast the first day, there was a pill beside my plate, on the table. A brown pill. I didn't touch it, and I haven't seen another one since. But I didn't think it was weird until just now.

It's difficult not to pet the cats— there's a ginger cat who keeps sitting beside me at the lunch table, and a little tabby cat that is quite vocal and obviously very friendly. If I had enough food I'd share with them.

I wonder if I can sneak out tonight. I forgot to mention before, last night I heard a couple mumbling in romantic tones, and after a few minutes of eavesdropping I'm pretty sure I determined they were *inside* the building and not walking on the beach. Which, if true, means someone had a sneaky conjugal visit last night. I'm nothing but jealous. Speaking of rule-breaking, I noticed today when I went down for lunch that the stairs leading up to the fourth floor (girls are on the third, boys on the second, reception on first) are now blocked by a stack of mattresses, and there's a sign that says "course boundary, do not continue beyond here." Oddly enough, it never occurred to me to go up to the fourth floor, because I assumed there were just more rooms up there, but now I'm curious as hell and I intend to go up there as soon as possible. And I'm getting a bit more brazen with rule-breaking— at this very moment I'm listening to music with no headphones (I handed them in, like an idiot)... maybe part of me hopes I'll get caught.

Definitely thinking now that it's me against them... already I'm thinking I'm too tired to sneak out tonight. This is how they control you, they keep you sleepy and hungry and weak and then when you feel like you could use some good advice, they tell you you can't have any because you can't call anyone whose opinion you trust, and you get to the point where you can't really think for yourself.

13:12 Holy god I just remembered I'm supposed to be getting out of here! How could I forget that? What tipped me off was that I was on my balcony just now and I saw a man walking by and I thought, I should scream for help. Then I kind of snapped and realised my plan was to pack and go. I can't believe I forgot for so many hours. So I'm packing now before I forget again.

NOTE FOR MELISSA: IF YOU ARE READING THIS AND YOU ARE STILL IN THE HOTEL, PACK YOUR BAG NOW, TAKE IT DOWNSTAIRS, AND ASK CEREN FOR YOUR MANILA ENVELOPE. DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT YOUR BAG OR ENVELOPE. MAKE SURE THE ENVELOPE HAS AN IPOD, A PHONE, AND A CAMERA INSIDE. MAKE SURE YOUR COMPUTER IS IN YOUR BAG. THEN GO, GET OUT OF THE HOTEL AND CALL EMIRHAN.

As it turned out, I didn't need the safety net warning. I packed immediately and after some faffing, went downstairs to ask for my envelope.

Okay, home stretch.

Getting out of the hotel was easier than expected. By the time I got packed and double- and triple-checked that I had everything, the bell was ringing for the next group session. I sprinted down the stairs with my bags, ahead of everyone else, and when I landed in reception the girl who was ringing the bell spotted me. She smiled and asked if everything was okay. I smiled back (how great it felt to look at someone and give them a facial expression!) and said yes, I was fine, I just needed to pick up my manila envelope and I'd get out of her hair. She played stupid and said, "oh, you want to leave?" Well, yeah, that's usually what it means when someone packs their bags and vacates a hotel room and comes down to reception.

So she told me to have a seat, because there's a *process* for leaving—they ask you to speak to the teacher first, in case the problem turns out to be something that can be resolved. I shrugged and said fine, I felt like there was no talking me out of leaving and I was in no danger of being hypnotised back into the fold. So I sat in reception and waited while the girl went upstairs to get Hartmann. Meanwhile, boys and girls came filing down the stairs like zombies, eyes blank and mouths open, for the group session. They walked so unbelievably slowly, their faces were completely dead, and I couldn't imagine how much worse they would look in a few days. If they saw me sitting there with my bags, they didn't let on. Several sets of eyes passed over me and kept going as if my chair had been empty, not even a hint of hesitation in their gazes.

Eventually the girl came back downstairs (she, strangely enough, was bouncy and clear-eyed) and asked if I could follow her to the kitchen and Anna Hartmann would meet me there. I made a face, because what was wrong with meeting me in reception? "Miss Hartmann doesn't want to upset the other students," she explained. Hell, the students didn't even notice I was sitting here, and some of them looked directly at me. But anyway, I thought it would be over with sooner if I just did as she asked, so off we went.

When we got to the kitchen I tried as hard as I could not to make the connection between this room and the food I'd been eating for three days. The place was filthy. I couldn't believe how awful it looked. I stared out the window because I thought if I saw a roach or a rat or something I'd scream. I'm really surprised they were willing to let me see that. Maybe it was a parting shot at me? Not sure. Anyway, Hartmann came in after a few minutes, all Buddhist serenity and smiles, and said, "Ayla tells me you want to leave?" Yes, that's right, I'd like my envelope and I'll be on my way. "But you made a commitment!" she protested. I could have gone into all the ways I thought our contract was made null and void by misrepresentation on their part, but I wanted to keep it short and sweet so I just said, "yes, well, I've changed my mind." To her credit, Hartmann didn't push it; she just

said, “okay, sorry it didn’t work out for you,” and she went in to oversee the group session. Ayla wished me well and she started to leave also, but I reminded her that I didn’t have my envelope back yet.

So we went into the front office, and I expected her to open some big hotel safe (which is where I was specifically told our stuff would be kept), but I didn’t even see a safe in the room. Instead, she pulled an old cardboard box out from under the desk and started rifling through it. The box had no top and was just sitting there on the floor. I briefly questioned why things hadn’t been locked in a safe as I was promised; Ayla just said that the door to the office is kept locked and that the area was secure enough. I sighed and dropped it because I wasn’t in the mood to get in a big argument. She had a lot of trouble finding my envelope, though, and I started to get nervous when she reached the bottom of the box and hadn’t come across it yet. I was just about to tell her that she better not have lost my stuff, when she finally produced the envelope with my handwriting on it. Relieved, I took the envelope and thanked her and out the door I went.

The first breath of beach air was heavenly. I cannot imagine how good it must feel to be in prison for months or years and then finally step outside into freedom. Three days was enough for me. Tabby cat found me almost immediately and we finally got to have that snorgle. I briefly thought about taking a taxi into town, but that would have involved going back into the hotel and asking them to call one for me, and in any case I hadn’t exercised in several days and looked forward to an hour’s walk along the beach road. I stopped to pet every single damned cat I saw on the way.

Unfortunately for me, about fifteen minutes after I left the hotel a sudden storm opened up and insane horizontal rain came pelting across from the sea, soaking me through. I couldn’t see ten feet in front of me, and I was worried about all the electronic stuff in my bag. I started to head toward the hotels in the hopes I could find shelter on a veranda, when a police van pulled up and a cop told me to hurry and get in the back. There was no room in the front of the van where the seats were, because the cop had already stopped to pick up a group of young mothers who had been out walking their babies on the beach when the storm hit. So into the very back I went— you know, where they put the prisoners. Irony. It was extremely uncomfortable, just a metal bench with a pole to attach handcuffs to. But it was dry, and the cop was friendly. He dropped the young moms off at a house up the road, and then invited me to sit up front with him. I asked if he could take me to the bus station, and he said it was no problem because the police station is just across the street from there. I was very thankful for the ride. Turkish police can be really great.

I arrived at the bus station about 15:00 or so and headed straight for the Uludağ office, which is the company I rode up with. Unfortunately the guy was a complete asshole and before I even finished my sentence and explained that my Turkish wasn’t very good he cut me off with “no.” But see, I just want to go to— no. No seats left. Well, how about tomorr— no. Then he rattled off a bunch of stuff really fast in Turkish, and wrote a date on a post-it note: 19 October, nearly a week away. I got the picture, but I couldn’t believe it was as simple as that. There had to be a seat available to *somewhere*. He didn’t even hear where I wanted to go!



I was just about to protest when I heard someone go “psst.” I looked to my left and the guy at the only other office, Kamilkoç, beckoned me over. He asked in very loud, over-exaggerated English, “where would you like to go today?” Antalya, I said. “Suuuuuuuuuure, that’s nooooooo problem at aaaaaaaaall! We would be haaaaappy to send you to Antalya today, the bus leaves here at 19:15,” he said, glancing over to make sure the Uludağ guy heard him. Obviously they’ve got some long-standing issue, the two of them. Mr. Kamilkoç is more than happy to steal the customers Mr. Uludağ can’t be bothered to deal with, and rub it in his face. Fine by me.

I didn’t even think to look at the Kamilkoç office to begin with, because Kamilkoç is a luxury line, very expensive, and as I understood it they don’t do buses from the Erdek area to Antalya without having to go all around the whole damned country along the way. So I was nervous while I waited for the guy to find me a seat during the Bayram (which is the Muslim equivalent of trying to buy a standby ticket on Christmas Eve). Then it occurred to me that all I had on me was forty million and that probably would only be about half what I’d need even to be allowed to breathe the air on a Kamilkoç bus. I dreaded having to walk all the way down to the marina, where the cash machines were, in the pouring rain, with my bags. I pulled out my ATM card (which is a proprietary card, neither a Visa Electron nor a debit card) and asked the guy if there was a bank closer than the marina that might give me cash. He asked which bank it was and then said, “oh, it’s no problem, we have a facility for that bank inside our booking system, we can withdraw the money directly from your account if you know your PIN number.” Gasp! I do, I do know my PIN number! Yay! I decided I didn’t care if the ticket cost four times what I usually pay.

Then came the funny part— I guess because I had a US passport in my hand and I wasn’t speaking Turkish, the guy assumed I was a tourist who didn’t *understand* any Turkish. So while he’s typing he starts talking to his work associate sitting next to him, and he’s getting nervous. His friend asks what the problem is, and the guy says, “no seats.” Friend says, “no seats at all?” Nope, none at all. “What if you route her through Bursa?” There was some frantic typing, and then... no. “What about through Balıkesir?” Frantic typing... no. “Izmir?” No. “*Ankara?*” No. The guy was starting to sweat. His friend said, “you’re going to have to tell her.” He shook his head and kept typing. Friend said, “what are you going to do, drive her to Antalya yourself?” The guy replied, “if I have to, yes.” He then looked over at Mr. Uludağ and said, “I will not let that asshole win.” Ha! Male competition is good sometimes.

So finally after lots and lots and lots and lots of typing, the guy tilted his head at me and said, “is it important for you to sit in the same seat all the way from here to Antalya?” Sheeit, I’ll ride on the *roof* of the fucking bus if you send me to Antalya. Just get me there! A look of relief washed over his face and he said, “I’ll give you the student rate as compensation, I’m really sorry about this.” Woo-hoo! He then got back to his typing and after a long while he printed out *seven* different tickets, all for different branches of the trip and all for different seats. He explained that the bus is actually direct from Erdek to Antalya, I wouldn’t have to change buses, but I’d have to pay attention to which seat I’d have to switch to at which station. He made me a handy post-it note list of all my changes so that I wouldn’t have to unfold my tickets every time. He then took my passport details and ran my ATM card through. I was shocked when the receipt came out of his printer— 45 million total, which was exactly what I’d paid for my Uludağ ticket on the way up. Mind you, that’s the student price, and I had to change seats seven times in ten hours, but still. I was totally happy and even joined in the let’s-piss-on-Mr.-Uludağ game by loudly announcing, “you have been soooooo helpful and sooooo kind, everyone in your country is so frieeeeeeendly except for *certain* people.” Mr. Kamilkoç giggled.

So then I had about four hours to kill. The rain had let up enough that I thought I could venture out for food in my raincoat if I didn’t have to take my bags. Kamilkoç provide free luggage storage for their customers (seriously, totally high-class operation), so I handed my bags over the

counter and headed out for some real. fucking. food.

I have a friend named Adrianna Tan who is a travel and food writer, and she often says in her blog that one of the things she finds most frightening in this world is widespread vegetarianism. She says when she travels through India it actually keeps her awake at night. I thought it was a bit extreme to go as far as to call vegetarianism frightening— I always just thought of it as a personal choice. But now, I kind of see her point. It's hard to explain. In any case, suffice it to say that I had copious amounts of chicken while I waited for my bus, and it was damned near orgasmic. Probably not for the chicken so much, but I want his family to know that he did not give his life in vain. I always wondered if I could ever hack it as a vegetarian; my guess now would be that I wouldn't even be interested in giving it a trial run. I might revise that stance later when things aren't so raw in my head, but as of right now I'd say I'll stick with being an omnivore.



Anyway, the rest of the day was uneventful. I phoned Emirhan and updated him, ate chicken and wandered around town for a while,



drank tea with Mr. Kamilkoç (who told me that Mr. Uludağ actually speaks perfect English and was just speaking all that fast Turkish because he doesn't like foreigners and simply didn't feel like helping me),



watched a *concert in the bus station* (hey, it's a small town, what do you want),



and generally milled around the area and took photos until it was time to go.



There were plenty of cute stray animals to snorgle with,



including this guy, who as you can see is feeeeeelthy and couldn't even be bothered to lick the ice cream off his nose after we shared dessert. His belly and feet were all muddy, but did that stop me from picking him up and flipping him over like a baby and cuddling him? No, of course not. I tried to rinse him off in the bus station sink, but uh... let's just say he's not into rinsing. He made that abundantly clear. I did manage to get his feet pretty clean, but they were probably muddy again five minutes later.



I took a photo of myself just to prove that I still existed. I could also do with some rinsing, as you can see, but I waited until I got home.



Incidentally, if you're ever traveling in Turkey, my advice is pay the extra and use Kamilkoç. The guy carried my bags to the bus, explained to the steward about my musical chairs situation, and told him to keep an eye on me because I was a female traveling alone. He also asked if the steward could ring him when we got to Antalya just so he'd know that I made it safely. Wow. And the bus, oh my dear lord. Now, I'm kind of picky about cross-country buses anyway (probably because I ride them around quite a lot), but this vehicle was *faultless*. Easily the most comfortable bus ride I've ever

had. And get this: Kamilkoç vehicles are WiFi-enabled via satellite broadband. I was catching up on e-mail all the way home! The steward was telling me that soon they're installing personal power points in every seat, so you can charge your phone or plug your laptop in. Then the next step will be DVD players with screens embedded in the back of the seat in front of you, above the tray table, and a variety of DVDs for rent. That is going to be so frickin' sweet. And they feed you, boy howdy. And the steward came around every fifteen minutes to refresh my drink. I'll probably never use another bus company again.

So I arrived home about 06:00 the following morning, exhausted and emotionally drained, and slept most of Sunday. I'll talk about some aftermath stuff below and the reasoning behind why I did things the way I did, but basically that's the saga over at long last. I still feel some lingering confusion, but not as bad as other stories I've heard. The one that sticks in my memory is a guy I read about who stayed for his entire retreat and upon leaving discovered he'd developed a speech impediment that he hasn't been able to shake after six months, even with the help of a speech therapist. So I guess I'm pretty lucky just to be a little bit confused.

When I got home, the thing that chilled me to the bone was... those people I was locked up with were still in there. That is, if I didn't spark a mass exodus, which I probably didn't. And they still had seven more days to go. Holy god, I can't even imagine it. But I guess they were pretty numb by then and probably didn't even realise what was happening. I was on the border of that myself. Hell, some of them may even come out of there saying it's the best thing that ever happened to them.

Thoughts, observations, clarifications:

1. Vipassana itself is not bad or evil, nor is it something to avoid. That would be like getting food poisoning from a particular restaurant and then deciding never to eat any food at all from anywhere ever again. Vipassana is an ancient meditative tradition that was practiced by the Buddha himself and has profound benefits for those who follow it. I was practicing Vipassana for about a year before the retreat, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. My argument is not that Vipassana is bad, or even that what Goenka promotes is not Vipassana. I do believe there is plenty of legitimate Vipassana teaching going on at these retreats, but I think perhaps there's also something else going on and that the Vipassana is bait for some other kind of mind control, something much more dramatic than what Vipassana does. I think this is probably why Goenka is so insistent that if you attend his retreats and subscribe to his method that you should never entertain any other schools of Vipassana, and that indeed to do so would be dangerous. He says it's because keeping a pure practice is vital and you shouldn't mix-and-match, which is true, but I think the reality in this case is that if you start doing Vipassana retreats elsewhere you'll start to see through the Goenka mind tricks and figure out that Vipassana is not the crash-bang instant cure-all he claims it is. But that's just my speculation.

At the risk of putting a connection in your mind between meditation and religion (I'd like to stress that no such connection exists), perhaps a good analogy would be that of Christianity— Jesus was probably a decent guy, and he was a single person with a single message, yet today his followers have branched off into countless groups, all of whom claim something different in the name of Jesus, and practice their beliefs in wildly different ways. Some groups are harmless and peaceful; others are complete nutcases who may teach some of the ways of Jesus, but whose other practices seem to have little to do with what Christ taught. Looking at them all as a whole, you wouldn't believe that such disparate groups of believers could all operate under the same name. But that doesn't stop each of them from calling their churches Christian, nor does it mean that some people wouldn't find benefit or solace in any one of them. Perhaps the retreat I attended, though it didn't

suit me, suited some of the other students perfectly. Perhaps another school of Vipassana will host a retreat that will really click with me. I certainly intend to attend other retreats in the future (though probably not another Goenka retreat, even if I find one with awesome food).

I still don't even think that Goenka himself is necessarily a bad man or that he's automatically doing something wrong, because I've read countless tales of people who come back from his retreats feeling fantastic and having their lives changed for the better. However, I've also read of certain crazy nutcase Christians saying the same thing about their churches. I think benefit is a very subjective thing, and if someone feels a certain practice is enriching their lives, and it harm none, then more power to them. Let them get on with their craziness. Also, I'm sure (and I've read) that even with strict uniformity and quality control, one Goenka retreat is not necessarily like all the others. There are renegade Goenka nutcases just like there are nutcases in any other school of thought. I'm not sure exactly where Anna Hartmann falls on the nutcase scale, because her direct interaction with students is kept to a minimum. As I said before, pretty much every account I read prior to attending the retreat reported that the food was a highlight, that students were well-fed and well-rested, and that everyone was thrilled with the meals and wanted to go back just to have the food again. So I definitely think my bad experience in this department was a Goenka anomaly. Perhaps Hartmann engineered it that way and Goenka would have her fired if he ever learned that she was starving students. I'm not sure, but I do think that food and sleep have a lot to do with learning and suggestion, which leads me to my next point:

2. Since arriving back home I have downloaded a few of the group meditation recordings and listened to them while doing my regular home meditation practice, and my finding is that when the recordings are listened to by a relatively happy and well-rested person on a full stomach, there's none of the creepy confusion or mental haze. In fact, I found myself to be quite refreshed afterward and felt I was thinking clearly and in complete control. This leads me to believe that either I am wrong about Goenka using hypnotic suggestion, or the technique he uses is so subtle that it's only effective on those who are food- and/or sleep-deprived. So perhaps people who attend retreats where there is ample food and rest don't experience ill effects from the recordings. Keep in mind that most hypnosis is used for self-improvement and has no evil objective, so maybe Goenka is just giving gentle pushes. However, although I don't believe there are any subliminal messages embedded in the recordings (keep in mind hypnosis and subliminal suggestion are not the same), even if Goenka is using *any* kind of sub-surface suggestion in a benevolent way, if he is using it at all there should be full disclosure. People should know what they're signing up for. After all, if he is using hypnosis and said hypnotic technique is affected adversely by such hard-to-control variables as how much food Anna Hartmann serves her students, then Goenka should act responsibly and accordingly. At the very least, if he's going to be a good magician he needs to have better control over his trick and make sure all test subjects are fed and rested equally all over the world. I know I'm not the only one who has used the word "hypnosis" to hypothesize what goes on during Goenka group meditations. I'm tempted to re-find those people and ask if they were deprived of food or not. I've read all kinds of reports and can't remember who said which awful thing, so I'd have to go back and check, which leads me to my next point:

3. I have been asked why on earth I would attend a Goenka retreat after having read so many first-person accounts of horrors and bad experiences. This one's easy— in case you hadn't noticed, people on the internet are melodramatic, they're idiots, and they're full of crap. Also, having worked extensively in service industries, I know for certain that people who are unhappy are much more likely to speak up than people who are happy, thus leading to the false impression, based on negative reports, that everything in the world is bad and you should never do anything. You don't often hear

from the bazillions of satisfied customers, because people who are content don't feel the need to elaborate. They just want to sit back and enjoy their contentment. But take that contentment away and boy howdy, you're going to hear about it, and the story will get grander and more dramatic with every telling. Come spend a week with Antalya tourists and you'll see what I mean— hangnails turn into life-threatening gangrene before your very eyes. Storytellers who have been wronged love their histrionics, so people bitching about something on the internet wouldn't necessarily put me off. In fact, it wouldn't sway me either way.

There's also a certain attraction when someone tells you to stay away from something. This is why people are so fascinated with spending the night in allegedly haunted houses. After I came home from retreat, Emirhan listened to my story and then said, "they starved you and tried to steal your mind? I totally have to see that. When's the next one?" So I don't think reports of something being dangerous or evil will necessarily keep people away. Even if I had believed everything everyone on the internet had said, I probably still would have gone. Sometimes you just have to experience something for yourself. And anyway, it's not like I hadn't read plenty of positive reports as well. I'm still curious what would happen if I went on a Goenka retreat at a place with good food and correctly-measured rest periods. I definitely think it's possible that it's Hartmann I have an issue with and not Goenka, which leads me to my next point:

4. I am not at all sorry I went, nor do I feel traumatised, distressed, anguished, or miserable, nor do I feel this is a situation which requires blame or regret. In fact, I think my friend Michael's comment sums things up perfectly: "That story is totally awesome. I'd loved to have gone with you just so I could have told it too and laughed our asses off after we escaped. Well done. Absolutely awesome." Yeah, that pretty much captures my attitude. I'm sure as hell not going to stop going on adventures because of this. If I had the kind of personality that gets scared off easily, I never would have ended up in Turkey. Or England, for that matter. Or even university. How would I react if someone told me they were going on a Goenka retreat somewhere? I'd tell them to go for it. Hell, I might even go with them. I'd tell them about my previous experience, and also about the hundreds of accounts I read where people had a great time and came out feeling renewed and rejuvenated. I'd ask them to remember everything so I could have a full report when they got back. I have absolutely no hard feelings about what happened, and I think it's very possible to have a positive experience at a Goenka retreat. Regardless of the type of retreat I had, I think every experience in this world is a valuable one.

Now, onto less involved points:

- I did actually learn some stuff about the Vipassana technique while on retreat, and my home practice has benefitted because of it. I'm able to concentrate better and get into the meditation groove more easily, and that's great.
- I don't think this was a case of "you get what you pay for"; it's common practice for many meditation retreats, which are often run by Buddhists, to be held on a *dana* (donation) basis. In fact, I'd be more suspicious if a retreat were expensive. It's not supposed to be a luxury holiday.
- Since coming back my confusion has lingered intermittently. If I have only one thing to focus on at a time (like writing), I'm okay. But if I have to multitask, sometimes it goes awry. Yesterday I came out of the shower and my hair was still full of shampoo.

- I appear to have picked up some superpowers such as x-ray vision and teleportation. I can also shoot daggers of fire from my navel.
- I'm feeling a lot more directional and goal-oriented again, but that may be more down to the travel than the retreat experience.

Anyway, let's get back to life, I think we're done with this subject pretty much.



It feels great to be caught up with telling this story. I feel like I can move forward now with a clear head. If you read this whole thing, thanks for sticking with it. I hope you got something out of it, and I hope you try meditation at some point if you haven't already. It's not all crazy nutso stuff. Thanks for reading.

*Melissa Maples*  
*October 2007*



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