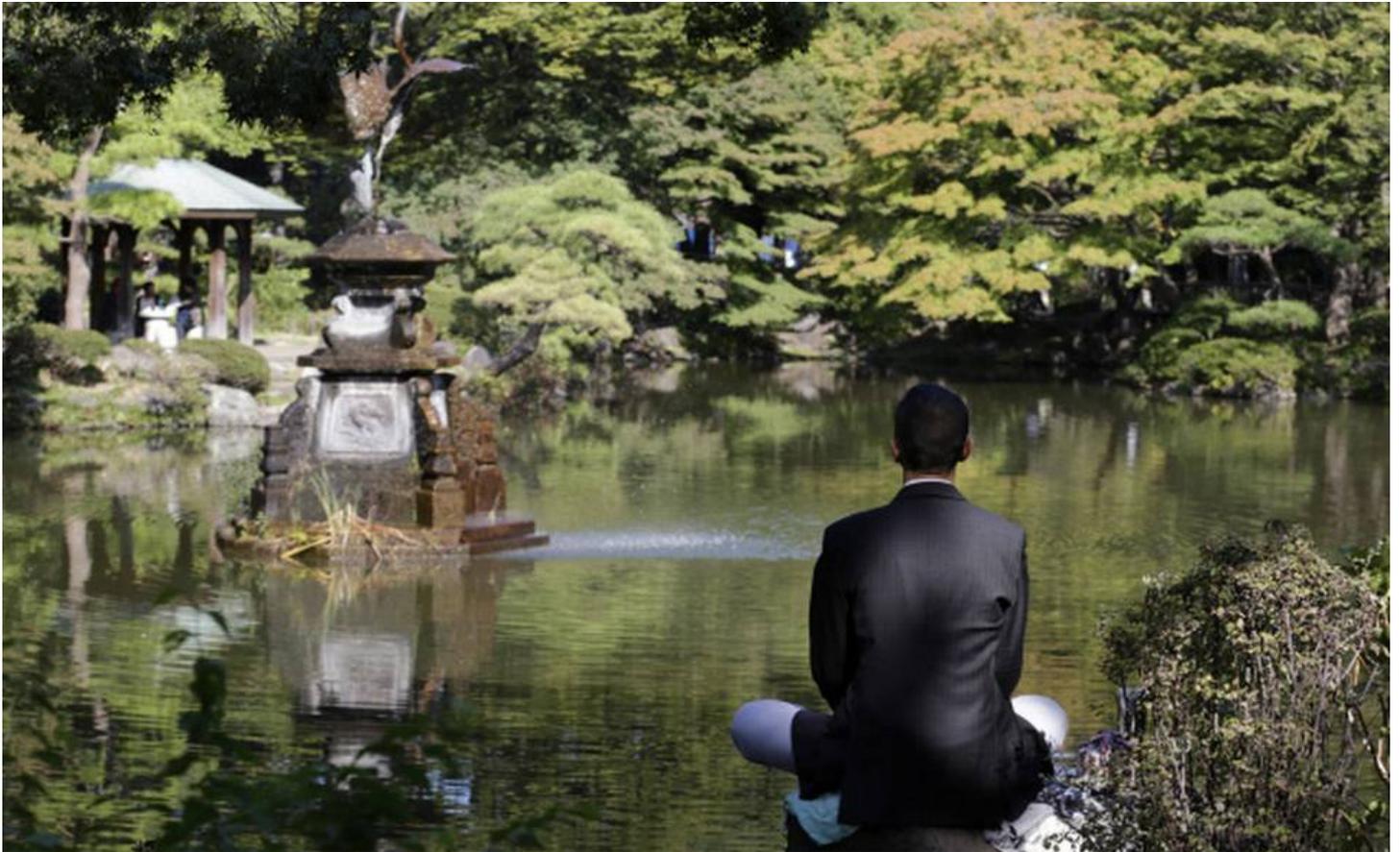


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A slow dance with silence

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Reji Varghese shares his experience at a ten-day-long Vipassana meditation boot camp

Imagine a place cut off from the rest of civilisation – no TV, no phones, no newspapers, no reading or writing material. You wake up at 4 a.m. and meditate for 10 hours a day. The last meal of the day is lunch at 11 a.m. You live here in complete silence with a hundred other people who you can't talk to for ten days. Sounds crazy? Welcome to the world of Vipassana meditation, a boot camp for the mind.

If I knew how tough it was going to be, I would have chickened out, but my friend said, "Think of it as a slow dance with silence." With that thought in mind, I checked into the meditation centre in a rural area about six km from Pallavaram on a sultry Wednesday evening and surrendered my phone, my wallet and myself for ten days.

We were woken up the following morning by a loud gong, and at 4.30 a.m., the meditation started. There were just a few simple instructions given on how to observe your breath as it comes and goes. I thought to myself this is going to be easy – no mantras to learn, no auto suggestion – just observe the breath.

A few moments later, I realised how difficult it really is to 'just observe the breath.' In a few breaths, my mind had wandered; it had drifted to some old memories which triggered thoughts, plans and worries about the future. I was hurtling at great speed between the past and the future, unable to concentrate on the simple task.

Vipassana means insight, or to see things as they really are. The first insight I had was about silence. I realised that even in a quiet environment conducive to meditation, the main noise was not from the outside, but from within my head. My mind was chattering non stop – commenting, planning, worrying, judging, liking and disliking. The absence of external sound is not what silence is about.

An even bigger insight was to find that the tool I use to make decisions every day – my mind – was not in my control. During the evening discourse, it was explained that the problem of a wandering, uncontrolled mind was universal, and it needed to be trained with patience and persistence. Far from being a slow dance with silence, this was turning out to be a wrestling match with my mind.

After a few days of observing the breath for ten hours a day, my mind became quieter. The intervals of pure observation became longer, and three days into the intense meditation, a strange thing happened: silence finally turned up.

But Vipassana is not about silence or a heightened sense of awareness. It's about observing reality as it is, and along with the pleasant sensations of quietness and calmness, unpleasant sensations also came up. Bad memories, painful experiences, people and events that caused me hurt and pain, surfaced. But instead of reacting with bitterness and hurt as I had done before, I watched the emotions rise, and after a while, they passed away.

For ten days, I see-sawed between silence and pain, the pleasant and unpleasant, and I did what I was asked to do – observe. The last morning, we were getting ready to go back to the real world; a world of noise, phones, emails, texts, arguments and the constant struggle of just trying to get by. My mind felt as if it had been put through a washing machine and all the muck had been cleaned out.

I looked around to say goodbye to silence, my elusive dance partner, and I couldn't find her. It took awhile to realise that she was with me. At the end of ten days, I realised that the dance and dancers had become one.

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