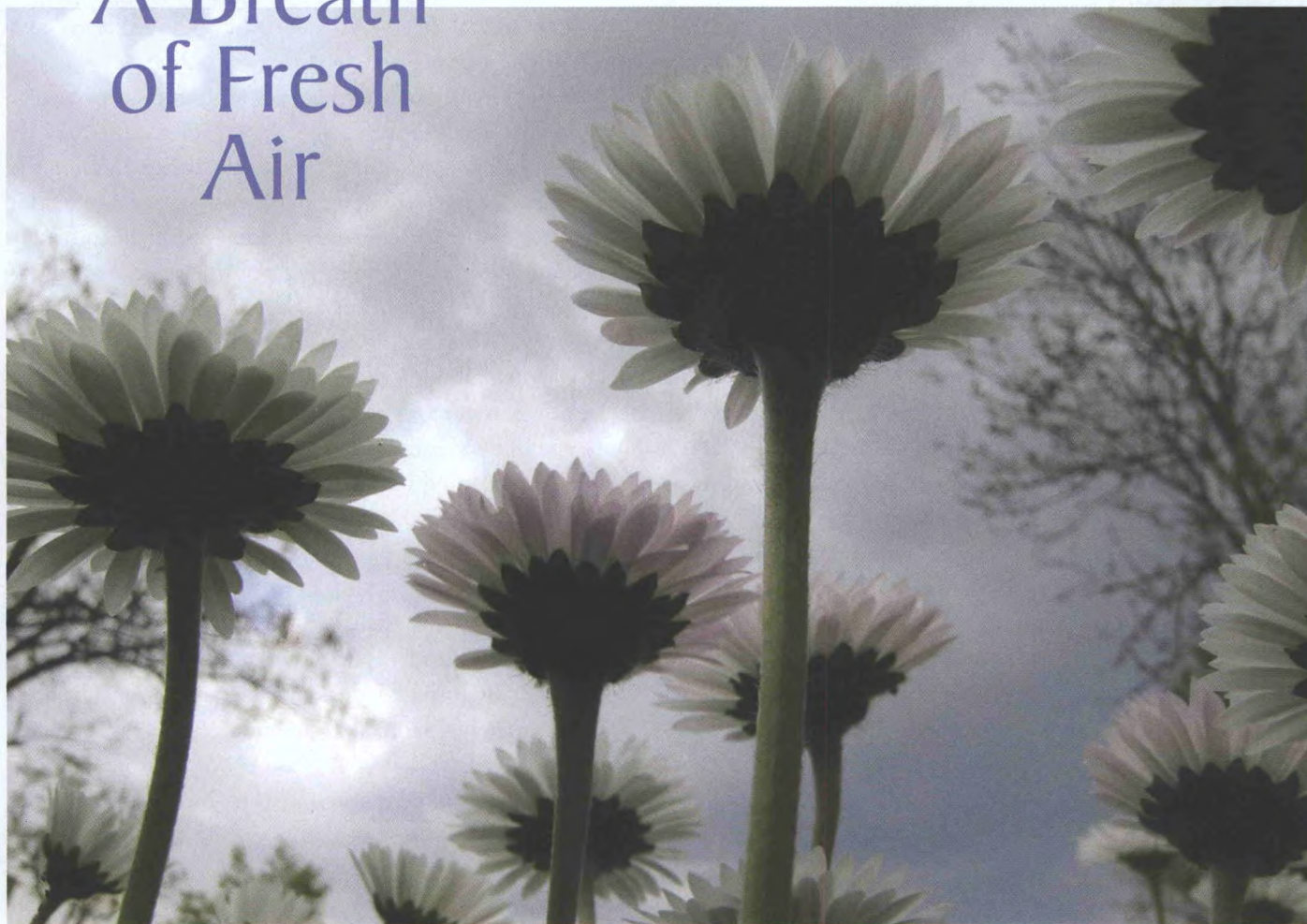


A Breath of Fresh Air



By Adele Hulse

I needed a holiday, one that restored rather than exhausted. Fortunately, I knew where to get it. Dhamma Aloka Meditation Centre in Woori Yallock [Victoria, Australia] has a regular schedule of ten-day courses in Vipassana, classic mindfulness meditation as taught by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. Ten days with forty people (genders are separated) in total silence. No eye-contact, reading, writing, or leaving the premises. Vegetarian breakfast and lunch but no evening meal. Heaven.

The Vipassana lineage survived in Burma following the sacking of Buddhist culture in India by the Moghals, and that is where Satya Narayan Goenka learned it in a desperate attempt to cure his critical migraines. The very successful head of a Hindu business family, he explored expensive cures in Europe before discovering that Vipassana provided an

alternative to a lifetime on morphine. Since his first course in India in 1969, more than 200 centers have sprung up around the world.

Goenka, now 83 and still teaching, insists everything be provided free. No commercial activities take place at any of the centers, including book sales. All costs and services are offered voluntarily by experienced students, and only those who wish to make donations. Set up as charitable trusts, the centers' finances are transparent and the facilities only improve. Dhamma Aloka is clean and tidy, the food ample and delicious. Still, no-one wanting to roort a system is going to pick one that means getting up at 4:00 A.M. and spending twelve hours a day sitting in a darkened room observing one's breath and physical sensations.

That's what you do, simply observe. No religion, dogma, ritual, or conversion. Vipassana is non-sectarian and the center displays no images. It is not about philosophizing but doing. Observing. I spent the first three days wincing with pain, constantly shifting position in search of comfort. But comfort is not a word to associate with this extreme spiritual sport. Besides, what is comfortable one minute is painful the next. That's how we live, habitually oscillating between craving and aversion trying to find some sustainable plateau of pleasure. And pleasure is not sustainable because everything is forever changing.

Such observation allows one to experience life as it actually is. It's hard to train the mind in something so basic but the result means coming alive to reality, often for the first time. Goenkaji's warmth and wisdom flow through his taped voice. He knows about pain. "Start again," he says at the beginning of each session. "Start again with a calm and alert mind."

No one broke Noble Silence. We ate together and passed each other like ghosts. No one reached out to pluck a hair off anyone's shoulder, tuck in a clothing label, bequeath a smile. We sat with closed eyes, but one sneaked looks. "Gee, she hasn't moved once!" I am instantly flushed with competitiveness. "Stop it. Go back to the breath." The blissful silence forbade useless comparisons. By day five we had to sit for hour-long sessions without moving, watching sensations with equanimity. When you observe pain, without adding to the problem by wanting it to change, it changes anyway ...

I have attended many meditation courses involving visualization and analytical meditation, lectures, study, and discussion. Confronting the untamed habits of my mind over one hundred and twenty hours, without the distractions of others' opinions or expressing my own, put the spotlight on what I already knew: that I am grossly egotistic and given space, my mind entertains itself with scenes

of self-adoration and the belittling of others, especially if they were not nice to me.

This is how it goes: watch the breath, watch the breath, in, out, in ... That snide so-and-so. Making that sneering comment at dinner fifteen years ago. Oh if I could see him now things would be different! I'm wearing blah blah blah and I'm sitting here and he's sitting there and he's careful, because I'm just glowing. Then I make this clever subtle comment that just undoes him! Ha!

Whoops! Watch the breath watch the breath watch the breath. Yeah, I've got great taste. Shut up! Watch the breath watch the breath. She's mean. What about the time ... Shut up! Just look at this angry conceit you are producing out of thin air, this righteous vengeance befouling even your own shallow virtues. You are always innocent, the other person always wrong. The past is gone, the future is not here, you cannot hold your mind in the present and your dominant mental habit right now is anger. The more the self-interest, the more anger. It's obvious.

Watch the breath, the boring, in-your-face, life-giving, utterly essential miracle of the very next breath. And the next. And the next. One breath is no less important than another. Turn off the inner television and chip away at the wall of illusion, the strangling ghost of ego with its quiver full of defensive arrows until it no longer stands between you and reality. Insight, they say, arises on the basis of real experience rather than theory and is achieved only through long, daily practice. Ignorance is not bliss and until we have really listened to ourselves we are just so much more noise in a world bursting at the seams.

In my opinion, the best meditation teachers charge the least amount of money. Go try some on, and stick with one that appeals to you. ☸

Adele Hulse is a long-time student of Tibetan Buddhism. She is compiling a book of reminiscences about FPMT's founder, Lama Thubten Yeshe. Chapters appear regularly in Mandala. See page 64.

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S.N. Goenka, popularizer of Vipassana

