

# LISTENING TO THE

## ON A 10-DAY MEDITATION RETREAT IN SUMMER, RUTH McIVER STRIVES TO FACE AND EMBRACE SOMETHING FEW IN THE INFORMATION AGE EVER SEEK: SOLITUDE AND PEACE.

CHRISTMAS DAY. I am already experiencing the thrill of solo travel, heading by tram and Skybus into the drizzle of the empty city: multiple-seasoned Melbourne, my home for all of four years. With an emigrant's sense of freedom, I've rejected the bottles, singing and brawls of the catastrophic yet compelling clichéd Irish Christmas. And I'm doing this, down to the very last detail, alone.

Determined to see the New Year in sombre and sober, I'm going to the right place to do both: a 10-day Vipassana meditation retreat, deep in the Perth hills, during a typically scorching summer.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, I realise – as I drive into the almost iridescent Western Australian sunlight – is that, besides being without air con, I won't be able to record any of this experience. Phones, computers, books, notepads and pens are contraband. Speaking, gestures and physical contact ditto. Intoxicants are not permitted. In truth, only the last of the five 'precepts' I've signed up for – refraining from killing any living creatures – really seems feasible.

The countdown to Vipassana coincides with the onslaught of the silly season. As I anticipate the retreat, my anxiety begins to take on a galloping kinesis of its own. Rather than preparing for a spate of 'noble silence' by meditating, I've been self-

medicating with bottles of wine and countless cigarettes: a relapse into bad habits. Vipassana's enforced abstinence is beginning to loom as a kind of informal rehab as I fall, slowly and reflectively, down the rabbit hole. Or into the abyss.

So I find myself here, aged 30, in the middle of a dark forest – so to speak. Amid moderate successes and triumphs, here stands the ruin of my interpersonal relationships. Here lies the incomplete manuscript (I've been working on for six years), the chronic anxiety, the depressive episodes – a refraction of the incompleteness and chaos of my life.

Fear of solitude is termed *autophobia*, derived from two Greek words: *autos* (self) and *phobos* (fear). *Autos* is the root of English words such as 'automatic' and 'automotive' (self-moving), and 'autonomy' (self-governing). I was basically born both self-moving and self-governing: bounding from country to country, more supervised than raised. At 17, I shrugged off my parents' light yoke. This road I have carved seems increasingly more arduous and ruinous than I had ever anticipated.

I can be alone. In fact, as a writer – one who has spent long passages of life single, living alone, going overseas alone, spending hours barricaded with books, alone – I not only crave space, but I'm custom-made for solitude. What, then, am I so afraid of? Society

tends to make the things we fear shrink, but not disappear. Whatever this thing is that waits in solitude and silence is possibly the most potent and unspeakable phobia of them all: *thanatophobia*. Fear of death.

In this remote, fiercely beautiful, bush camp, I first learn to focus on breathing and dispel thought. Although Vipassana rejects all impediments to reaching insight, the meals are exquisite: a rich buffet blend of East and West, albeit served at the seemingly ridiculous hours I am growing accustomed to. My Buddhist friend who pointed me here later tells me that it's good 'merit' (a Buddhist tally of good deeds) to feed those undertaking the course. The lavish meals are intended to nourish the body, thus removing another distraction to insight. I find I'm without appetite, but I relish these moments of society in the cool hall. And by day two I have read all the tea and coffee packets, and the signs posted on the walls, several hundred times. I'm having acute text withdrawal. So much so, the teacher accedes to lending me a book of Buddhist discourses, which I tenderly cart around and ration so as not to abuse the privilege.

We head to the temple at 5am, in darkness. There we spend most of our waking hours till lights-out at 9pm. The temple is not air conditioned and is, initially, a kind of torture chamber with comfy cushions. We sit with no anchor

# SILENCE

but the breath for hours at a time. I oscillate between extreme agitation and stupor. It's blisteringly hot. I fantasise, rebel, resist – indulging in delicious thoughts and illicit reverie.

On the first night, I am startled by a goanna hiding under my pillow; I have to mime a horrified girlish shriek. On the second day, when the kindly, overweight teacher smiles benignly and tells us to find the breath, I find instead such an acute sense of suffering that I involuntarily weep, leaking tears. This, curiously, coincides with the greatest sense of peace I have ever felt. I weep and weep, slowly prowling the grounds at dawn and dusk – the only times it is cool enough to be outside – kicking the red dirt.

My favourite part is the temple that has been erected to honour the original teacher, Sayagyi Yu Ba Khin. I take the bush trail and walk slowly around the pagoda, which has a kind of Disneyland charm, gold-peaked with gaudy coloured-lights and a ring of potted geraniums: magenta, blood-red, purple. Craving words and sensation, I walk the hot, perfumed grounds. Then I enter the temple and kneel and pray for emptiness.

With the five precepts come the five hindrances, which I rapidly cycle through: sensual craving or lust, anger or ill-will towards others, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry – and then doubt. I keep thinking of the five

stages of grief, as I simultaneously lust for sinful actions and nurse spiteful thoughts about a finicky, neurotic woman who, despite being silent, has somehow managed to shit me to tears. What the hell am I doing here anyway? This is a farce.

Then comes fear and despair: I'm doomed, ephemeral. I'm alone in a godless universe and now I must relinquish all the tawdry and sensual pleasures that make existence tolerable. Throughout this torment, an awful one-woman comedy show plays in my head, one-liners at the tip of my tongue, screaming for enunciation. The white noise that has been binned and stored in my subconscious comes spilling out: plots from trashy movies, advertisements, trivia – all now at blaring volume.

And then peace comes.

I sleep easily. I walk slowly, eat slowly, gratefully and not before bowing in prayer; it simply feels natural. My body is somehow purified. My breath in the morning smells sweet, clean. And as quickly as peace is embraced, it is vanquished.

And then, it's over. In truth, I don't want to leave, but as soon as the time arrives I flee. I clutch my blue Buddhist bible as we speed out of the compound and into the squat, beautiful and deeply suffocating city of my childhood. Transactions are necessary. I slip into eating without ritual, talking without

consequence; the mobile phone comes out; music, booze and company fill me to the brim with a curious ease.

Post-retreat, I can ideate, speak, celebrate these forbidden worldly fruits, yet I squirm with uncertainty and unease. Strangely, I am afraid to reflect, to write it all down, to gorge on the written word as I had hungrily anticipated.

When I return to Melbourne, I'm met with a chorus of curiosity. *So was it relaxing? How did you manage to shut up for so long? No, seriously, how?* And so forth. It's almost like asking someone who has experienced childbirth or near-death what they have seen. It's inexplicable, painful and ultimately powerful beyond words. It seems I can't articulate what noble silence meant for me. And after my initial honesty is met with discomfort, I resort to a stuttering series of clichés. I am not the glowing, relaxed little book of calm that I and others anticipated.

Vipassana is not a resort, nor is it about relaxation; it's about gaining insight, and insight can be a painful thing. And so it continues. I schedule my next course, later in the year. Winding myself back up, to allow myself to unravel again, and to return with the courage to act upon my fear to face my insights this time.

*Ruth McIver is a Melbourne freelance writer, reviewer and emerging novelist.*