

Frequently asked questions about Vipassana meditation

Q. Why is the course ten days long?

A. Actually, the ten-day course is the minimum; it provides an essential introduction and foundation to the technique. To develop in the practice is a lifetime job. Experience over generations has shown that if Vipassana is taught in periods of less than ten days, the student does not get a sufficient experiential grasp of the technique.

Traditionally, Vipassana was taught in retreats lasting seven weeks. With the dawning of the twentieth century, the teachers of this tradition began to experiment with shorter times to suit the quickening pace of life. They tried thirty days, two weeks, ten days, down to seven days—and they found that less than ten days is not enough time for the mind to settle down and work deeply with the mind-body phenomenon.

Q. How many hours a day will I be meditating?

A. The day begins at 4:00 a.m. with a wakeup bell and continues until 9:00 p.m. There are about ten hours of meditation throughout the day interspersed with regular breaks and rest periods. Every evening at 7:00 p.m. there is a videotaped lecture by the teacher, S. N. Goenka, which explains the progress of one's experience through the course. This schedule has proved workable and beneficial for hundreds of thousands of people for decades.

Q. How much does the course cost?

A. Each student who attends a Vipassana course is given this gift by a previous student. There is no charge for either the teaching, or for room and board. All Vipassana courses worldwide are run on a strictly voluntary donation basis. At the end of your course, if you have benefited from the experience, you are welcome to donate for the coming course, according to your volition and your means.

Q. I can't sit cross legged. Can I meditate?

A. Certainly. Chairs are provided for those unable to sit comfortably on the floor.

Q. How can I be sure I am capable of doing the meditation?

A. For a person in reasonable health who is genuinely interested and willing to make sincere effort, meditation (including “noble silence”) is not difficult. If you are able to follow the instructions patiently and diligently, you can be sure of tangible results. Though it may appear daunting, the day's schedule is neither too severe nor too relaxed. Moreover, the stability of other students practicing conscientiously in a peaceful and conducive atmosphere lends tremendous support to one's efforts.

Q. Do I have to be a Buddhist to practice Vipassana?

A. People from many religions and no religion have found the meditation course helpful and beneficial. Vipassana is an art of living, a way of life. While it is the essence of what the Buddha taught, it is not a religion; rather, it is the cultivation of human values leading to a life which is good for oneself and good for others.

Q. Why is a course conducted in silence?

A. All students attending the course observe “noble silence”—that is, silence of body, speech and mind. They agree to refrain from communicating with their co-meditators. However, students are free to contact the management about their material needs, and to speak with the instructor. Silence is observed for the first nine full days. On the tenth day, speech is resumed as a way of re-establishing the normal pattern of daily life. Continuity of practice is the secret of success in this course and silence is an essential component in maintaining this continuity.