

**Retreats at Insight Meditation Society, Barre, MA:** During my earlier years, I undertook a number of visits to IMS (for vipassana meditation ) and the Buddhist Study Center (study of the canons). The very first nine day insight meditation retreat I undertook at IMS remains memorable. The reason I decided to attend a nine day retreat was to force myself to meditate for extended periods of time. Usually 50 minutes for sitting and 30 minutes for walking meditation. I chose to do this as I was well aware that I possessed an aversion to sitting still for such extended periods of time, preferring just being mindful of being present and how my machine was operating.

I arrived with a good friend of mine and after checking into our dorm room, it seems we all had to attend a group meeting and decide what job we would like to pursue. After hearing the various jobs, I decided on becoming the yogurt maker for several reasons. Yogurt was made every other day after dinner in the kitchen. Therefore, after arising at 0600 hr and having breakfast (which was macrobiotic I think), I could take a nice long, hot shower while everyone else finished their morning chores. A morning shower is how I awaken my body and so being the chief yogurt maker was a smart idea.

After the morning work period, around 800 hr sitting meditation began. To my great dismay, I quickly discovered that I did not have the proper type of meditation cushion for my body structure nor was one available at the retreat center. Consequently, I found myself unable to get physically comfortable regardless of using a Zen kneeling bench or any type of cushion. I am sure I was a big fidgeter as my legs and back ached miserably. Other attendees took mercy on me and allowed me to try different sitting paraphernalia, but nothing worked.

The good news is that I realized quickly that vipassana had little to do with what actually transpired during any particular period of sitting or walking. Some times I found it easy to attend to my inhalations and exhalations, other times I was unable to maintain my attention on my abdomen for more than a few breaths. So I brought my attention back to breathing every time it strayed without complaining or ill will towards myself. Sometimes, I had brilliant periods of processing data before I noticed that my attention was not softly focused on my breathing.

But, most often, I found that I could focus easily on my breathing pattern for several minutes and then I would lapse into long periods in which I was without thought. My awareness had vanished, but I was not asleep. The gong would sound and I found myself back in my normal awareness without any memory of what had transpired previously. Similar events happened after I learned TM. My mantra would drop away and nothing else was present, including myself.

It was not until a number of years later that I realized that I automatically entered into the eighth jnana—where there is neither perception nor not-perception. It was very restful and calming, but now I understand why involvement in the Buddhist jnana states has never interested me.

To be continued

This still happens to me today if I sit and meditate.