

EDITOR'S
NOTE

Too often we think that cessation indicates an end. When in reality, it may be a transition on to another level. When one stops talking, for example, the silence can speak for itself...if one is conscious enough to allow it. Thus it is with Nupu Press who experiences that gaps can become connectors. Conversely, in SM Shahrukh's fiction, we see ugly truths emerging – all the more dangerously because they are unspoken.

Today's SLR also marks the last one under my editorship. It has been a pleasure and honour to nurture the Daily Star literary page and I am grateful for the experience. Wishing SLR readers wordy, worthy adventures ahead!

Munize Manzur

"Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance."
- Khalil Gibran

CREATIVITY IN SILENCE

Nupu Press

I can't sit still, I love to talk, and reading and writing are my favourite activities. So when I first heard about Vipassana – a ten-day silent meditation retreat – I thought it sounded torturous. It was my friend Swati who sold it to me by saying I always kept my physical space streamlined, yet I had never decluttered my mind. After years of contemplating it, I finally applied and got a seat at the Dhammasarita Centre

and watch him speak on video for ninety minutes every evening. The centres are free of cost. We are provided accommodations and meals, and asked to observe all their rules.

These include no speaking, unless to teachers or staff about practical matters, and no eye contact with fellow students. All electronic devices along with any reading or writing materials have to be handed in when we arrive.

experience.

I feel better by Day 2 as I now understand the ins and outs of things. The actual meditation part is no more tricky than I expected: I try to focus my mind and get distracted within seconds, so spend most of my time gently pulling it back. What's difficult is how I literally cannot sit still for more than thirty seconds, and to realise how appalling my posture is. I'm not unfit, but I've spent decades sitting hunched over my laptop or collapsed on soft seating. My back feels weak. I have the same urge as when sitting on a long haul flight in economy to stretch out on a flat surface.

Not reading is excruciating. In an average week in my normal life (for Vipassana is now appearing deeply abnormal), I read three new books, a dozen blogs, several daily newspapers, and listen to about twenty hours' worth of cultural podcasts (which is like reading via the ears). I've rationalised this volume because I don't watch TV or waste time net surfing, though I see it might be excessive. Sitting in Vipassana, however, it sounds heavenly. Just as being on an Ayurvedic retreat some years ago had me dreaming about chocolate, here I fantasise about the books I will soon read.

Not writing is the worst of all. Normally I write my diary and a blog, and am always working on some fiction. There's one that began as a comedy of errors short story twenty years ago when it was published in a literary journal. I expanded the idea to a novel and began work on it before getting stuck on a murder mystery subplot. Over the years I've jotted down random ideas for it. I decided a month ago to finally write this book. Yet I kept stalling.

On Day 3, my mind – after spending Day 1 recalling recent events and Day 2 fretting over my to do list – is a little more calm. Then something dramatic happens. In one flash, the book's story appears fully formed in my brain. It's as if I'm standing in front of a giant mural and I can see it in its entirety as well as its individual brushstrokes. It's clear how the mystery story is the main plotline and how it connects absolutely all the random lines I'd been writing haphazardly for 20 years. It's like a giant piece of machinery with a thousand moving parts all suddenly

slotting into position. I'm so emotional that tears stream down my face.

We're allowed to ask questions at the end of each day. I go, weeping, to ask if I could write for ten minutes (as any writer knows, the Fear of Forgetting is terrifying). The assistant teacher reminds me it's against the rules.

Still crying from the drama of it all (twenty years!) I go to my room to prepare to sleep. I rummage in my handbag for lip balm and find a pen I'd forgotten I'd packed. I have three choices: I could leave the centre and go home to write. I could stay and write furtively. Or I could surrender to what I'd committed. I'm tempted by the first, but settle on the third. I will stay and I will not write. For now.

There's one other foreigner, a young Chinese woman. We meet with the one English-speaking assistant teacher together every other day to report on our progress and problems. We also watch the English videos every evening in a separate room. One night, it's raining and she doesn't have an umbrella so I share mine with her. All this is done in companionable silence. Given the no-eye-contact rule, I don't really know what she looks like.

Despite my love of conversing, I find the silence restful. Not having to make small talk is the most peaceful of all. I hadn't realised it was so draining to participate in the social niceties that are not required here. I accidentally speak twice to fellow students, once when someone sneezes and I say "bless you"; another when I bump into someone and apologise. I could be the sole survivor of an apocalypse and my mother's well-trained daughter will still be polite to debris.

Over the next several days I meditate in earnest. My book idea continues to expand and solidify in my mind. I eventually go from fidgeting every thirty seconds to every three minutes, though that's the most I manage. And every day I consider leaving. This is the toughest thing I have ever voluntarily done. The hours feel interminable.

We are not allowed to exercise beyond walking. I resist the urge to do squats and push-ups. Note: I never get the urge to do squats and push-ups but it's like the time I was told before an MRI scan to not take deep breaths and that became all I wanted to do.

Though I brought enough clothes for

the duration, I wash each day's wear by hand before I shower. This gives me something to do in the resting hours, which pass just as slowly as the meditation sessions. I sweep my room and clean my bathroom daily. I find nail clippers and tweezers in my bag; my brows and nails have never looked so tidy. I walk after every meal. When the monsoons begin in full force on Day 5, I get cabin fever.

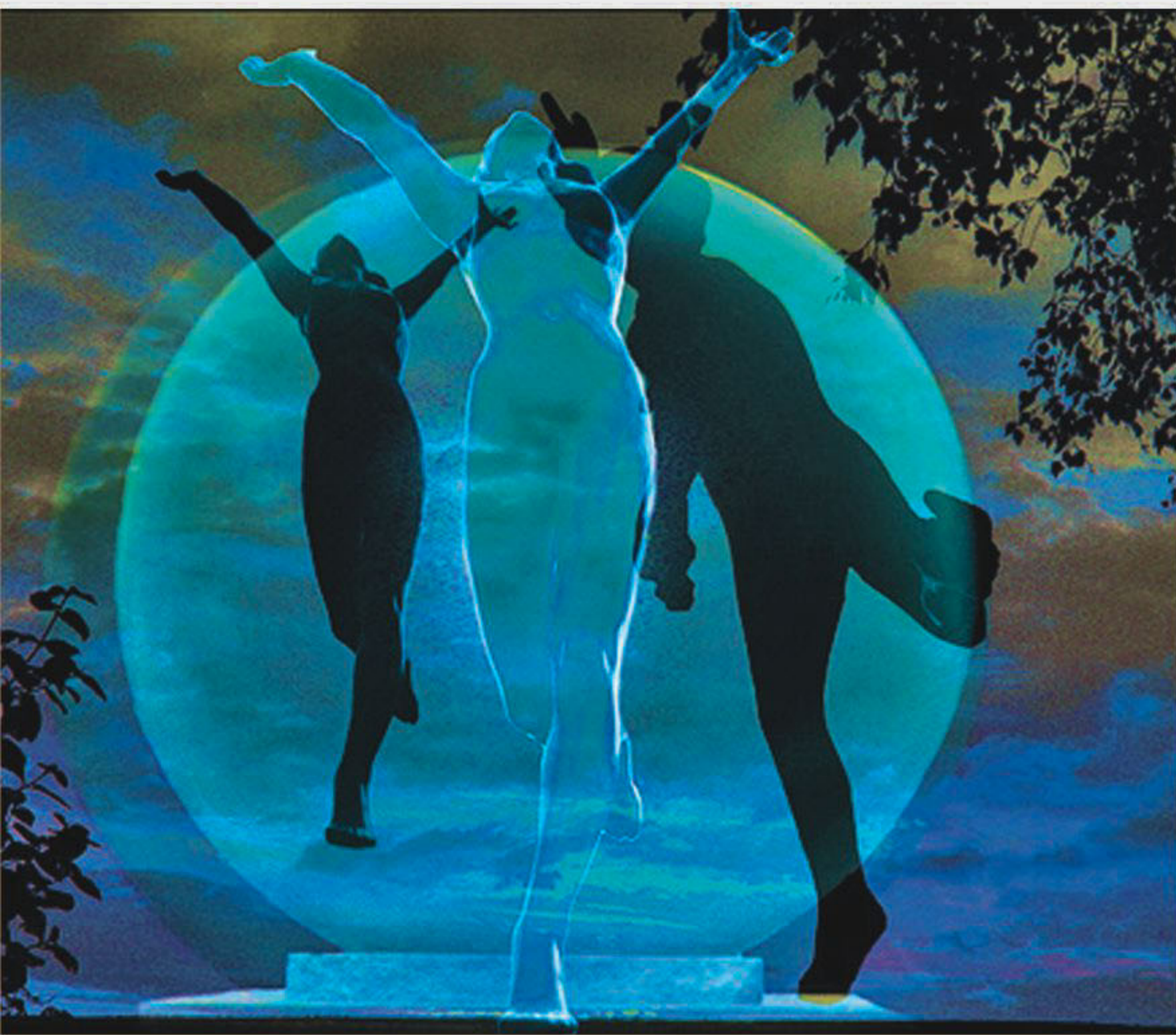
The purpose of Vipassana is to purify the mind. We are warned this could involve uncomfortable stages as old thought patterns clear out. I twice had major open abdominal surgery where in the immediate aftermath I felt helpless, trapped and faintly hysterical. This is how I feel now.

Vipassana teaches us to see things as they really are. In that "this too shall pass" way, we release our attachments, especially our cravings and aversions, as we experientially understand how impermanent everything is. I am already painfully aware of this; I was ten years old when my brother died. I have built my entire life on the premise that nothing is permanent. I know that all we have is the present. The more I meditate on this, the more I yearn to do what I really love: write. To not waste any more time. If these are my last days on earth I would rather be putting words down, not sitting in the lotus position with my eyes closed. I feel done. And so, on Day 7, with three days left, I ask to leave the centre.

The teachers and staff, all of whom are exceedingly kind, urge me to stay on; an incomplete Vipassana doesn't give its complete benefits. I tell them my appreciation of all I have learnt – the silence, contemplation, clarity, and perspective. The practice of focusing on the internal rather than being distracted by the external. I know I wouldn't have grasped the entire book's story if my mind were not this still. I don't regret coming here at all. But I am sure about leaving. I am released on Day 8 and take the train back.

I don't call or speak to anyone, though I do record my notes into the Voice Memo app on my iPhone. Then I sit down to write. It's like coming home.

Nupu Press is a writer and film producer. Her blog is at www.nupupress.com



in Maharashtra for July.

Founded by S. N. Goenka, there are Vipassana centres across India and the world. Using an ancient meditation technique rediscovered by Buddha 2500 years ago, it is non-sectarian and anyone from any background can participate. The format of the course has been smoothly standardised across all the centres: we follow Goenka's recorded voice instructions in Hindi and English during meditation hours,

I've heard from friends of Vipassana's profound benefits, and vow to stay open to everything. But as I hand my phone in, it suddenly becomes real and I wonder what I've gotten myself into.

Day 1 (and I am definitely counting the days here) is overwhelming. I am disoriented for much of it. I miss the 4:00 a.m. start and sleep through the first two hours of meditation. There are eight more hours of it throughout the day. We are asked to surrender to the

The Red Dress

S M Shahrukh

The rain stopped quite a while ago but one felt the remnants of it dropping from the trees and the tall buildings. Plop! Lands a fat drop on a passerby. A man with glasses gets a glob on his lens that gives him a sudden and distorted yet magnified view of the city of his habitat; a drop on a red dress turns black and makes the happy mood turn to a grim darkness.

The man sitting on the pavement stool, sipping a cup of extra-sweet tea and smoking a cheap but filter-tipped cigarette, looks and thinks of his wife, living in a village tending poultry, the homestead and the children; her dirty saree with breasts sagging already at mid-thirties, not a sign of allure left in her. The man, a security guard, looks at his uniform and feels that life has passed him by and he is yet to be forty. A pall of gloom descends on his face in the bright sun that has come out after the rain.

A religious man walking down the same street and still holding his umbrella open over his head, looks at a spot of red. He is hypnotized, forgets his destination, forgets the divinity he seeks all day and stands still, the umbrella now stopping hot beams of the sun instead of the rain. His eyes follow the red dot moving on the other side of the street and he feels the urge to follow her till the end of time. He

becomes a spectacle to the other pedestrians who are following the tableau and making a snide remark or two at the perceived feckless behaviour of 'a holy man'. He is oblivious to all but the red spot that has kept him enraptured and rooted.

On the street pavement is a tea-stall. There, on the sidewalk, squats a man chewing betel leaf and smoking a bidi; he spews a stream of red liquid on the street, takes a long puff on his bidi and thinks about how the breasts would look without the dress. He adjusts his member in open view, wearing a dirty lungi. Beside him, sipping a cup of tea is a young man, a new initiate at a madrasa. He believes in the revival of the Caliphate. He looks away and tells the tea-seller that women should not go out of their houses without male escorts; he then gives a lecture of the faith and its diktats to which no one pays any heed. Not least, the young man dressed in a bright shirt and jeans, with deliberate fade patches; a virgin teenager who started sweating profusely and put his hands in his pockets, as is the wont of the shy.

She is a young girl in her late teens; one may call her a woman in this country of child brides, and works at a garment factory with a meager compensation. Life is a day-to-day struggle with her ailing father and

housemaid mother, not to mention - the three other younger siblings. She is wearing a red top, which she recently got as a gift from a boy she likes a lot and to whom she has given her virtue in a factory nook. She is wearing tight jeans with her red top and is not using a wrap to cover her ample bosom and her head full of oiled luxuriant hair. He wants it that way. Today she is carrying a bunch of roses, clutched too tightly with one hand, the unshorn thorns cutting into her skin. The tryst is to be in a park. She walks confidently in spite of all the stares, the rapes men commit with their eyes, the judgment that pours from their mouths. She doesn't care. She is headed to the embrace of love. The world can go to hell, for all she cares.

She reaches the park and sees her man sitting on a bench but he is not alone. He has an older gentleman sitting with him. She feels a shudder of premonition, a sigh of disappointment; the world belongs to the two of them, doesn't it? Thinking the gentleman to be a relative, she composes herself, approaches the bench and gives her lover a smile and a respectful address to the older man. The young man tells her to sit between the two men and she hesitantly does. He then talks on his mobile phone and tells the girl that he has urgent business and has to rush off.



He tells her that 'uncle' will take her to dinner and then, home. She wants to ask, "Whose home?" but the young man is taking long strides out the park gate already. The 'uncle' gives her a suggestive smile.

She starts to hate the red dress. She

feels naked without the wrap and realizes that she is just a commodity. Like the shirts she makes at the factory. She clutches the roses harder and spots of blood appear on her hand.

S M Shahrukh is a freelance contributor.