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‘A marathon of the mind:’ Vipassana meditation comes to ACLT

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Course leader Raj Raman reflects on his experience at the Vipassana retreat in Claymore, Del.

Vada Mercer/Southern Maryland News

“It was like a marathon of the mind,” Raj Raman said as he described the 10-day silent retreat that would inspire him

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The retreat, which Raman attended in Claymont, Del., changed his life, he said, using silence and minimal stimulus to help participants turn inward.

For 10 days, Raman did not make eye contact with the other 80 participants. He could not contact the outside world or make physical contact with anyone else. He was not allowed to speak, and his days consisted almost entirely of meditation.

“The human being has six senses; we have eyesight, sense of smell, taste, touch, hearing and the mind,” he said. “In this environment, five of the six senses are kept under control ... so the mind has nowhere else to go but inward.”

The experience transformed his outlook on life, Raman’s wife, Saroja Raman, said. After his retirement, she noticed her husband had become detached and struggled to adjust to the sudden loss of structure in his daily routine.

“I could tell he wasn’t in a great place,” she said. “After the class, I noticed he’s been much calmer. His anxiety has reduced a lot, he doesn’t react the same way.”

Raman felt that change, too, and it's what inspired him to lead a free introductory course at the American Chestnut Land Trust.

“I feel like it’s done so much good to me, I want to give back to the community,” Raman said. “I really believe that if we all just look inwards and found happiness within ourselves, the world would be a happier place.”

Raman’s two-week course offers participants a shorter introduction to the Vipassana meditation technique while drawing on his experience at the retreat.

Over two weeks, participants attend one-hour weekend sessions at the American Chestnut Land Trust that include guided meditation followed by a gentle, silent walk through the preserve, encouraging participants to focus on the sensations of the

natural environment. During the course, participants also join live 20-minute online sessions scheduled outside of traditional work hours.

“I was surprised at the positive results, even with the 20 minutes that people did,” he said. “One lady was suffering from insomnia for 14 years and she started sleeping after four sessions.”

The Vipassana meditation technique from India consists of three stages.

The first stage, Anapana, teaches participants to narrow their focus to their breathing and the area between the tip of the nose and the upper lip.

“What you’re trying to do is you’re trying to control the mind,” Raman said.

The second stage involves objectively observing sensations throughout the body, beginning at the crown of the head and working downward. The goal, Raman said, is to observe sensations without making judgements or assigning meaning to them.

“As you start doing this, thoughts will come,” Raman said. “Don’t shoo them away. As the thoughts keep coming, it’s actually your body releasing this energy, it’s coming out.”

This process can elicit pleasant and unpleasant sensations, he said, and the important part is to become an observer without emotional attachment to any kind of sensation.

The final stage is "metta," the process of unconditional love.

“We are taught to forgive anyone and everyone who may have hurt us, intentionally or unintentionally,” Raman said. “We ask for forgiveness from anyone and everyone who we may have hurt intentionally or unintentionally.”

The course beginning July 11 will be Raman's second time teaching it. Though it has already filled up, he plans to offer the course seasonally.

More information on the 10-day retreat that inspired Raman's course can be found at www.dhamma.org.

"Helping people appreciate themselves, loving themselves and being happy from within is the start of a much happier society," Raman said.