

A Deeper Knowing

By Leigh Robshaw

Meditation retreats offer a haven of tranquillity far removed from life's demands.

Healthy meals are prepared for you, teachers are there to guide you, the environment is conducive to achieving results and all you have to do is sit and practice – which is not as easy as it sounds! Meditation can be hard work, but if you stick with it, the rewards are immeasurable. Not only will you be super-chilled out and less prone to stress, you'll be more effective at work, need less sleep and be healthier overall.



The Sunshine Coast offers two meditation centres that are the real deal. They won't ask you for much, but they'll give you a lot. The rewards? Greater health and happiness, pure and simple.

Chenrezig Institute, Eudlo

Cheerful rows of Tibetan prayer flags line the bush track that leads to the Chenrezig Institute at Eudlo, a vibrant oasis set in lush, subtropical surroundings. Whether you're visiting to meditate, study Buddhism or just enjoy a vegetarian meal at Lama Yeshe's Big Love Cafe, you'll be met with smiling faces and leave feeling elated.

Around 10,000 people a year visit Chenrezig, named after the Buddha of Compassion. Beginners can take introductory meditation classes, plus there's a kid's club on the first Sunday of every month. Those who stay on retreat can meet with resident nuns and monks, as well as the main teacher, Geshe Lobsang Jamyang, a sporty Lama with a great sense of humour.

When I took some meditation classes at Chenrezig, I was impressed with its practicality. The Tibetan word for meditation is 'gom', which means 'familiarisation'. Here you learn to become more familiar with what brings happiness and satisfaction in life, and less familiar with what brings suffering and unhappiness.

According to Chenrezig's director Maureen Walshe, everyone can learn to meditate and can experience its benefits after only a short time.



"Some people need to start with smaller sitting periods if they are particularly agitated," says Maureen. "A lot of people seem to think if you can't sit down and 'clear your mind' for 15-plus minutes you can't meditate, but clearing your mind is not meditating – watching your mind *is*."

Visitors can visit the meditation hall, or Gompa, any time between 6am and 9pm outside class times. The Gompa has to be seen to be believed – it's a veritable kaleidoscope of colour, with intricate Tibetan *thangkas* adorning the walls, golden Buddhas surrounded by lotus-shaped lanterns and shining silk banners hanging from the walls and ceiling.

The Garden of Enlightenment is also a must-see. Other facilities include a well-stocked gift store brimming with Buddhist paraphernalia, books, incense, prayer flags and handicrafts, plus an expansive library with more than 1800 titles.

The centre runs a weekly program of drop-in meditations and teachings by donation, supplemented by weekend retreats, which cost \$99, as well as longer courses. Accommodation varies from \$19 a night for a dormitory to \$60 a night for fully self-contained retreat huts. Chenrezig Institute welcomes day visitors from Wednesday to Sunday, and visitors should call in the morning to book in for lunch.



Vipassana Meditation Centre, Pomona

The Vipassana Meditation Centre at Pomona, Dhamma Rasmi, is tucked into 60 acres of pristine bushland, its simple, whitewashed cabins contrasting with the pink and orange hues of native flowers. Palm trees curve around the octagonal timber meditation hall and kangaroos laze in the shade, unfazed by the comings and goings of the meditators.

Mount Cooroora presides over the centre, a towering symbol of the stillness and silence inherent in the practice of meditation. Birdsong and a gentle breeze are the only sounds to be heard, as this is a silent retreat centre. You can speak with assistant teachers if any issues arise, but otherwise there's no chatting with other students and eye contact is discouraged. It sounds difficult, but it doesn't take long to really enjoy being the most silent you've ever been in your life.

Vipassana means 'insight', or to see things as they really are. The essence of the technique is to observe reality as it is, without attachment or aversion. Buddha practiced the technique 2,500 years ago, but this is a non-sectarian centre rather than a Buddhist retreat. It was founded by the Burmese S.N. Goenka, who began teaching Vipassana in 1969, and more than 100,000 people now sit Goenka sponsored Vipassana courses around the world each year.

The standard course is 10 days, with the first three days spent practicing Anapana, or observation of the breath. The Vipassana technique is taught on day four, and involves observing the sensations in the body, allowing the thoughts to arise and pass away.

When I did my first course, each hour seemed like an eternity at first, but by day five I didn't want to leave. Before Vipassana I dreamt of tidal waves and tsunamis; afterwards I dreamt of calm seas, and had a clearer sense of my life's purpose.

Vipassana centres operate solely by donation. There are no charges, even to cover the cost of the generous vegetarian meals or the accommodation. Donations are accepted only from students who have completed a 10-day course.

"Last year I think we had about \$350,000 in donations," says Anne Doneman the centre co-ordinator. "How can you put a price on something that is invaluable?"

The centre accommodates an average of 50-55 students sitting 21 courses per year, including children's courses. There are single and shared rooms, some with attached bathrooms.

Anne says two-thirds of those sitting Vipassana courses are new students and advises booking three months in advance for courses scheduled during holiday periods, or one month in advance for other times of the year.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

- The word 'meditation' comes from the Latin word *meditari*, to think, to dwell upon, to exercise the mind; and *mederi*, to heal.
- Meditation involves training or observing the mind until you reach a state of thoughtless awareness, which brings about a state of deep relaxation, encouraging physiological, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.
- The earliest records of meditation are the Hindu scriptures, or Tantras, written about 5,000 years ago, however we've probably been meditating since the first cave dwellers stared into the flames of a fire.
- Guatama Buddha studied meditation with other holy men about 2,000 years ago and helped spread its practice throughout Asia.
- Most religions and spiritual practices involve some form of meditative practice.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

- The health benefits of meditation are primarily derived from achieving the 'relaxation response', a term coined by mind/body medicine pioneer, Dr Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School in his 1975 book of the same name.
- The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress. Benefits include decreased heart rate, blood pressure, rate of breathing, and muscle tension.
- Harvard Medical School researchers have recently discovered that, in long-term practitioners of meditation, far more 'disease-fighting genes' are active, compared to those who practice no form of relaxation.
- Meditation has been shown to boost the immune system and can help treat a variety of physical ailments, from headaches and respiratory problems, to cancer.
- Richard Davidson, a top American neuroscientist who has studied the brains of Buddhist monks since the early 1990s, has found meditation significantly alters the brain, rewiring the regulation of emotion and attention.
- Meditation is seen as an important tool in treating many mental illnesses, such as depression and schizophrenia. It can increase levels of feel-good chemicals such as serotonin.
- Meditation facilitates the alpha brain wave state (8 to 12 hertz), associated with increased learning and memory.