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Vipassana Changes the Spirit of Business

By Raja M

After a 10-day Vipassana retreat southeast of Dallas, Texas, Thomas L Freese, vice president of Freese & Nichols, changed his approach to business management. Motivated by an ancient Indian self-observation technique called Vipassana, he began to think about blending such values as compassion and ethics with bottom lines and profits in his daily work.

Are formerly hard-headed Western businessmen falling for yet another handful of magic dust flung from the hands of the gurus of ancient India? Freese was relieved. He says: "Vipassana leads to clearer thinking and clear thinking is good for business."

A lengthening list of US, European and Asian corporate executives agree. Senior staff of companies including Microsoft, Citibank, IBM, Merrill Lynch and Zee TV experience Vipassana as a powerful human-resources tool. Special Vipassana courses are being organized worldwide for business executives and government administrators. Freese was part of one such course this May in "Dhamma Siri", near Dallas, one of six Vipassana centers in the United States.

Vipassana means "to see things as they really are" in the ancient Indian Pali language. A practical, universal tool to purify the mind, some call Vipassana a technology for inner peace. Others describe it is a deep surgical operation of the mind. An objective study of mind-matter interaction, Vipassana has nothing to do with any religion, cult, dogma or blind belief. Vipassana enhances the overall quality of life, as I have discovered from practicing it for more than 10 years.

Vipassana is taught in residential courses - from the beginners' 10-day regimen to 45-day and 60-day courses for advanced students. Completing a course demands discipline, will power and following such rules as not communicating with fellow students and the outside world for the duration of the course. The rule of silence until the penultimate day of the course is to calm and quiet the chattering mind and turn attention inward.

Happily, continuing a millennium-old tradition, no fee is charged for Vipassana courses, not even for board and lodging. Expenses are met solely through voluntary donations and services of previous students. Vegetarian buffets and simple, comfortable accommodation are provided in centers that are usually green, eco-friendly expanses.

The technique was practiced back in the mists of time before being rediscovered by Gautama Buddha, who practiced it to reach enlightenment. Vipassana then disappeared again, and was lost to India 500 years after his passing. But a chain of teachers in Burma preserved the technique in its purity for 2,500 years.

This volition to share merit earned helps to reduce the ego, the apparent "I" that the Vipassana student experiences as merely a mass of constantly changing mind-matter phenomena. Experiencing that impermanent nature of reality within changes one's outlook to life and fellow beings. Wisdom and compassion rise to the surface.

Sylvia Clute, a former attorney-general candidate in Virginia, described how Vipassana helps her combat stress: "I am not

attached to the actions of others, so I don't create conflict by responding negatively."

Besides realizing its potential to reduce conflict and enhance teamwork, corporate leaders experience how Vipassana increases efficiency, patience and self-dependency and progressively eliminates such negativities as anger, jealousy, and depression.

Certainly, it takes work. Changing habits is tough and takes time. Besides an annual retreat, Vipassana students are required to practice at home twice daily for an hour each. But those benefiting realize the commitment as an investment paying dividends for a lifetime. Veteran Indian industrialist Arun Toshniwal says: "After practicing Vipassana for over 25 years, I find that my capacity for work and clarity of thinking [have] increased. I gain time. Our staff attends Vipassana courses with paid leave."

Toshniwal is also an authorized Vipassana teacher, one among more than 600 trained assistants appointed to conduct courses voluntarily on behalf of Satya Narayan Goenka, 78, and his wife Ilaichidevi Goenka, Vipassana's principal teachers.

"Goenkaji", as Mr Goenka is known outside India, is a retired business tycoon from Myanmar who settled in Mumbai with a large, happy joint family. "Having been in the rat race of making money from a young age, I know full well how much tension and misery a business person goes through," he says. "Vipassana helps gain the mental wealth without which the material wealth becomes meaningless."

Goenkaji was authorized to teach Vipassana in 1969 by his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, independent Burma's first accountant general. "The time clock of Vipassana has struck," U Ba Khin declared when Goenkaji started teaching Vipassana in India, the land of its origin. U Ba Khin conducted Vipassana courses in his office premises to remove corruption in the Burmese government.

U Ba Khin professed an ancient prophecy that Vipassana would return to India and from there spread throughout the world. Indeed, either with or without the prophecy, Vipassana has spread rapidly since 1969, mostly by word of mouth, in cultures as diverse as Britain, Russia, Japan, Mongolia, Brazil, Iran, Thailand, China and Scandinavia. In India, the central government and some provincial governments offer paid leave for their staffs to learn the discipline. Courses are organized for prison inmates, students of technological powerhouses, and scientists at the Bhaba Atomic Research Center, a nerve center of India's nuclear program. Leading business schools such as Symbiosis send entire batches of management trainees for Vipassana courses.

Goenkaji conducted the first executive course in the United States in April 2002 in Massachusetts as part of a grueling 24,000-kilometer road odyssey across North America in which he conducted courses and addressed the public, the media and the United Nations as well as leading institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"The moment a defilement arises in the mind, misery too instantly arises. When one starts experiencing this reality within oneself through Vipassana, a change automatically starts coming for the better," Goenkaji says. He was a keynote speaker at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2000.

Organizations such as Spirit in Business, which invited Goenkaji to address a seminar during his North American tour, wants to enhance management principles. Founded in Amsterdam and with bases in the US, Spirit in Business (SiB) forged an alliance of companies such as American Express, Verizon and Forbes, senior corporate leaders from Videophone, Goldman Sachs, HP, universities such as Case Western Reserve's Weatherhead School of Management and the Copenhagen Business School, and thought leaders such as Peter Senge, Daniel Goldman, David Cooperrider and the Dalai Lama. Its aim is to "explore, promote and celebrate the reconnection of ethics, values and spirit in business leadership".

"Vipassana is an art of living through continuous self-improvement," says Rahul Vaid, a partner in Pacesetter Capital. "It has helped me immensely in adverse conditions, in being tolerant to others and taking positive action as opposed to blind reaction."

Nancy Stevens, a leading investment adviser and a former vice president of Wells Fargo, says Vipassana helped calm her in the face of client anxiety and market conditions. "The most important thing that I took away from the course was surrendering to the process and letting it unfold - contrary to my business training of being in 'attack mode'."

Stevens' realization highlights conventional business strategies turning to pragmatic wisdom: the obvious need to develop and harness the power of a balanced mind.

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