

The Sounds of Silence

Not many courtroom lawyers can shut their mouths for an hour, let alone a day or a week. But Thomas Crisman, a patent attorney and litigator with Jenkins & Gilchrist, a big corporate-law firm in Dallas, leaves his business behind every winter to spend a month in silence at a meditation retreat in rural India.

He does so to deepen his practice of an increasingly popular form of Buddhist meditation known as Vipassana.

Ordinarily a voluble man, the 59-year-old Crisman actually looks forward to his month of silence. “The transition can be difficult,” he says. “You’re coming out of a high-speed, high-energy, hard-driving world, and you’re moving to a much quieter, more peaceful place.” But the payoff is worth it, so much so that Crisman has taken a month-long retreat in India ever since 1980, when he met S.N. Goenka, a onetime Myanmar industrialist who is now among the world’s leading meditation teachers. Back home, Crisman and his wife, Tina, operate a Vipassana Website (www.dhamma.org) and oversee a meditation centre in Kaufman, Texas, that puts between 500 and 1,000 people a year through a ten-day introductory silent Vipassana course.

Vipassana meditation has been described as a journey of discovery, taken with the eyes closed. As Crisman explains it, practitioners observe their breathing, thought patterns, and physical sensations during meditation and train themselves not to react negatively to life’s inevitable stresses. Instead, they strive to respond “in a balanced way, without allowing events to whipsaw you.” Buddhists believe that practicing meditation helps restore people to a natural state, filled with love and compassion. “I don’t know anybody who has been through the full ten days who doesn’t come out the other side of it, really a different person,” Crisman says. “It’s like scrubbing the paint off the outside of a light bulb and letting the light shine through.”

Raised as a Baptist in West Texas, Crisman discovered meditation after experiencing a mix of career success and personal discontent. When a fellow patent lawyer named Jack Holder invited him to a retreat, Crisman figured he had

nothing to lose. Holder, who recalls that Crisman cried for 45 minutes when the retreat ended, says, “I knew then that something had happened.” Crisman was so taken with Vipassana that he arranged to spend several months in India and considered quitting the law.

“Fighting people all the time – that didn’t seem like a very good way to make a living,” Crisman says. Goenka talked to him out of it, saying that the law can be a tool to help people and that professionals like Crisman can spread the word about Vipassana among their peers.

As a partner at a big firm, Crisman now compresses his working load into about ten months a year. “I’ll work 12-hour days, some seven-day weeks, pretty much from mid-January until December, and I’ll end up billing more hours than almost anybody else” he says. “Then I go off to India, and my partners go off skiing.” Colleagues manage his cases when he’s gone.

He has made other adjustments too. He turned down legal work from a client who operated a Texas slaughterhouse. (Buddhism asks that its followers do no harm to “sentient beings,” although Crisman himself eats meat.) Another client asked him to apply for patents for machine-gun technology. “The guy’s a good client, and pays well, and he’s a friend too,” Crisman says. “But I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

But Crisman’s no less forceful an advocate; to the contrary, he argues that bringing calmness and perspective to a bitter court battle gives him an edge over an emotional adversary. “You can’t lie down and toll over when these jerks come along. You’ve got to push back,” says Crisman. “But to do it without the agitation, without the suffering, with a balanced mind – that was probably the No. 1 thing that I saw happen to me in my law practice.” Stan Moore, a law partner and friend, says, “Most attorneys look forward to the cocktail hour to go out and drown their stresses. Tom goes to meditate.”

Business people are turning to Vipassana meditation, which is described as a journey of discovery taken with the eyes closed.