

A *spiritual* LIGHTHOUSE



Aerial view of the Global Vipassana Pagoda

THE INAUGURATION OF THE GLOBAL VIPASSANA PAGODA IN SUBURBAN MUMBAI UNVEILS
A SUPERB PIECE OF ARCHITECTURE THAT HEIGHTENS THE CITY'S TOURISM APPEAL,
AND PROVIDES A PROFOUND SANCTUARY FOR THE MUMBAI SOUL

by **Harvinder Kaur**



A view of the smaller pagoda dressed with a golden coat

Sometimes revolutions happen silently. Like the wordless revolution of Vipassana. It's always been there – for twenty-five hundred years at least, now ebbing, now flowing. Since Gautam became Buddha – or even earlier. Now Vipassana waves are rising higher as more and more people learn and practice this ancient meditation technique. A wordless, silent change is rippling through, causing a silent revolution – literally.

Perhaps the apex of its influence was felt when the Global Vipassana Pagoda (GVP), built by the sweat, blood and tears of lakhs of Vipassana meditators, was inaugurated on February 8 this year by the president of the land, Smt Pratibha Patil, herself a dedicated Vipassana practitioner. The impressive ceremony included dignitaries such as Sharad Pawar, Union minister of agriculture and consumer affairs, food and public distribution, Chagan Bhujbal, deputy chief minister of Maharashtra, the governor of Maharashtra SC Jamir and Priyanka and Robert Vadehra. *Life Positive* advisor, the renowned Kiran Bedi was also one of the invitees. However, all eyes were on the wheelchair-seated SN Goenka, the architect of the Vipassana movement in India, whose moment it undoubtedly was. In a moving address he said that Vipassana stood for conversion, not from one religion to another, but from misery to happiness and from bondage to freedom.

Subhash Chandra, head of Zee and Esselworld,



who had donated the land for this ambitious venture, was an elegant master of ceremonies and steered the event to an efficient conclusion, even as thousands of Vipassana practitioners enthusiastically converged in what is called the largest pillar-less stone dome in the world.

Adjacent to the amusement park Essel World in Mumbai, people from all over the world will gather here to practise Vipassana. The structure is one that Mumbai is likely to take pride in. The height of the building is 96.12 metres, which is twice the size of the previously largest hollow stone monument in the world, the Gol Gumbaz Dome in Bijapur, India. The

**Guruji Shri SN
Goenka and
Mataji**



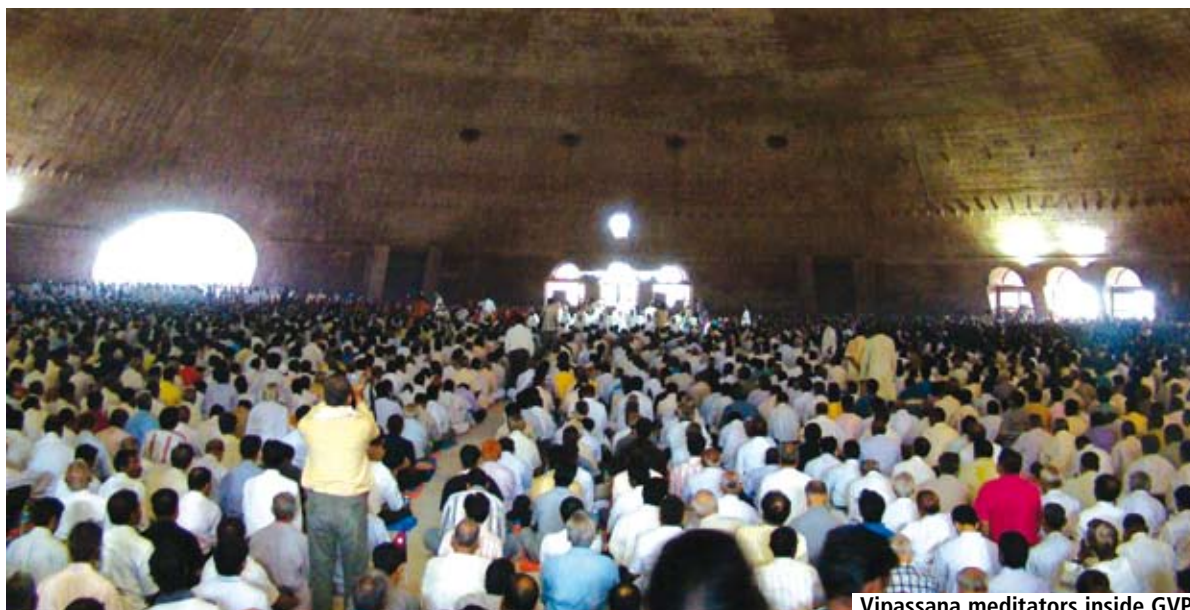
Decorative plaque on the GVP

massive inner dome can house 8,000 meditators at a given time. The pagoda is made of stones which are cut and shaped to interlock and give the structure stability. The pagoda is also to house a Dhamma museum and centre of learning with facilities including a museum, libraries, multimedia presentations, seminar

rooms, residential facility, etc. Its shape is inspired by the Shwedagon pagoda in Myanmar as a homage to Myanmar for preserving this ancient technique. Once complete, it is likely to boost spiritual tourism in India. Moreover, the structure acquires historical, national and spiritual significance as the bone relics of Gautama the Buddha, were enshrined in the central locking stone of the dome on October 29, 2006.

So, what is Vipassana? It is a meditation technique traced back to the days of Gautam Buddha who taught it to Buddhist monks. While it got lost in its original homeland India, its original purity and form was preserved in a small sect through the guru-shishya parampara, in Burma. It is described as 'universal medicine' that aims at purifying the mind and to rid it of impurities like anger, jealousy and fear leading to inner transformation. The technique is taught and promoted by SN Goenka in India who learnt it from teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, at the time a high government official in Burma, who later asked him to take it back to India. Legend has it that the Buddha had predicted that Vipassana will gain momentum after 2,500 years in India and from there spread to the world.

The Global Pagoda comes into being in Mumbai at an opportune time when the city has been freshly ravaged by terrorism and is in need of peace. Vipassana



Vipassana meditators inside GVP



A view of the GVP with the residential meditation hall

sadhaks never miss an opportunity to underline the secular and universal nature of meditation. While it is associated with the Buddha, its appeal and nature is shown to be scientific and not belief-based, much like hatha yoga. What is interesting, is that unlike many other modern meditation teachings, Vipassana is taught free. Even the boarding and lodging are provided free of cost. It is only after the rigorous 10-day beginner course where the practitioner is meant to lead a puritanical, monk-like life while observing 'noble silence' (total silence without words, gestures, or writing) that a donation is accepted. One of the trustees, Vallabh Bhanshali, points out that both the Global Pagoda and the 145 Vipassana centres around the world are primarily built with the donations from grateful Vipassana sadhaks after experiencing its benefits.

The Global Pagoda stands tall overlooking the sea in suburban Mumbai, not only as an architectural delight but more importantly as a spiritual lighthouse for those looking for direction. A treasure awaits those who can go within – not just the pagoda, but themselves.



For more information: www.globalpagoda.org

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The impressive dome ceiling



Vipassana by the sea