

Cross-border meditation

- [Chintan Girish Modi](#)



The Pakistani delegation at the Gateway of India—Photo: Arunangsu Roy Chowdhury

16 Pakistani nationals talk of contentment they found at a Vipassana course

“My dream is to have a Vipassana centre in Pakistan,” says Lahore-based Yoga teacher Saira Muneer, after completing a 10-day meditation course in Igatpuri.

Earlier this month, when the Pathankot air base was under siege, straining India-Pakistan ties further, Muneer and 15 other Pakistani nationals were at Igatpuri, quietly learning life lessons.

“I had a deep longing to come and learn Vipassana,” says Muneer. For her, the course was an extension of the work she does back home, teaching Yoga at Faiz Ghar and Lahore Gymkhana. “Yoga is in my blood. My father was born in Amroha (in UP). He moved to Pakistan after the Partition. However, he would come back to his house in Amroha for some time every year. Until 30 years ago, it was much easier to move between our countries. I used to come with him, and learn yoga with him.”

The delegation is part of a citizen-led initiative for cultural exchange, which is bridging the communication gap between people of India and Pakistan. Harsh Narayan, a Delhi-based filmmaker, who is coordinating this effort with support from the Vipassana International Academy in Igatpuri, said that on January 10, the group of four women and 12 men completed the 10-day course, which requires all participants to observe silence.

“Members of the group hail from Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and Rawalpindi,” says Narayan. He has been facilitating cross-border exchanges between artists, musicians, youth groups and intellectuals from India and Pakistan for several years in collaboration with Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth (Spicmacay) and Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy.

The 10-day residential course is offered free of cost at Vipassana meditation centres established by Satya Narayan Goenka in over 90 countries.

It is open to people of all religious and spiritual persuasions, including atheists and agnostics. However, there is no centre in Pakistan and those interested in the courses have to travel to other countries.

And it wasn't just the meditation course that the group's members were overwhelmed with. Group member Almas Bana, who is former CEO of Habib Education Trust in Karachi, says, “I was amazed with the genuine interest, empathy and curiosity about Pakistan among people here. The course design itself was very thoughtful. The key idea we learnt was to maintain equanimity — not to let success sway you, and not to be depressed by failure.”

Saira Muneer's son, Umar, who offers Yoga lessons to foreign nationals in Lahore and is studying to be a chartered accountant, feels refreshed. “Those 10 days of silence were a break for my mind. I had not meditated before, so it was new to me. But I was glad to give away my phone. I cannot describe in words the *sukoon* (contentment) I felt,” he says.

The group has members coming from all walks of life. There is 3D animator Muhammad Jawad and then there is Yoga teacher Iram Khan, who watches Baba Ramdev's videos on YouTube. Zaheer Butt aspires to study filmmaking at Whistling Woods film school in Mumbai.

The youngest member of the delegation is 19-year-old Ubaid Khiyani, who accompanied his visually-impaired sister Qurratulain Khalid, who teaches Islamic Studies at a school in Karachi.

"Initially, I found it (the course) very difficult," says Khalid. "I wondered why I had left the comforts of Karachi to come to India. Later, I realized how valuable my experience was. I noticed the similarities between Islam and Vipassana. Living in the present is very much a part of my religion. So is the idea of looking within. *Jisne apne aap ko pehchaan liya, usne rabb ko pehchaan liya* (One who understands self, will understand the almighty)."

The delegation is now in Delhi, visiting places of historical and cultural significance. On January 14, they enjoyed qawwalis at the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

It wasn't an enriching experience for the group alone. Premji Savla, chief trustee of the Vipassana International Academy, says, "The people who came from Pakistan showed tremendous dedication. We would like to continue hosting groups from there. Every living being breathes, and experiences pleasant and unpleasant sensations, regardless of religion or nationality or gender. Why do we see only differences?"

Karachi-based Wahid Karim, who was involved in putting together this Pakistani delegation, says, "All the Vipassana courses I have done in the past 15 years have been in countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, the UK, and the US. It feels great to be able to send a group to India.

"This happened thanks to the support we received from well-known Pakistani artists Noorjehan Bilgrami and Salima Hashmi, as well as Vijay Shah from India. I was born in a village near Junagadh in 1940, so India has a special place in my heart. I hope this course will help remove the hatred that has grown between the people over the years."

After the 10-day course, the delegation arrived in Mumbai and was hosted at the Global Vipassana Pagoda near Gorai beach in Mumbai. They spent two days in the tourist hotspots of Marine Drive, Gateway of India, and Juhu beach.

They also met Bollywood actor Vivek Oberoi and his mother Yashodhara Oberoi at their residence. The latter has been closely associated with the Vipassana International Academy.

The group will leave India on January 18, with a bunch of memories and *sukoon*.

(The author is a freelance journalist)

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