

A photograph of a person sitting in a lotus position outdoors, meditating. Their hands are resting on their knees in a mudra. The background is a soft-focus green landscape.

Shut up and meditate

Finding solace in silence is harder than it sounds, writes SUE WHITE.

If you've ever cringed at the 70-decibel racket of someone cranking up a blender, or the 100-decibel screech of a train pulling up at Town Hall, you're not merely having a sensitive day.

"In evolutionary terms, loud sounds are unusual. In nature they are a cue for something important happening, like a baby crying or a lion roaring," says an associate professor of psychology at Southern Cross University, Rick van der Zwan. "The mammalian brain is tuned to pay attention to these in case they are important."

The problem is, in the humdrum existence of urban life, they're usually not. But because we're programmed to stay alert, getting the brain to switch off can be a losing battle.

"When loud sounds happen all the time, the paying attention becomes quite stressful," van der Zwan says.

It's no wonder everyone from hippies to executives are heading for the hills of Blackheath, where the Everest of all silent meditation retreats, Vipassana, offers 10 days of blissful peace and quiet.

But as corporate speaker Ron Lee soon discovered, escaping the city doesn't mean silence comes easily.

"My brain normally doesn't shut up," he says of the challenges of sitting for up to 12 hours a day and staying silent even for meals.

"You're focusing on the insides of the nostrils for two days and you're not allowed to talk, gesture or even make eye contact with other people... To be honest, I was ready to leave after five days but they talked me into staying. In that remaining time, I got a lot of clarity: I wrote a chapter of my next book and the speech of my daughter's wedding. I wasn't trying to focus on those things, they just manifested."

Of course, given that at Vipassana you're not allowed to write anything down, Lee had to be content with the results remaining inside his head until he left.

In light of the obvious challenges, why are so many of us keen to relinquish our busy external world to focus on the chaos inside?

"I think it's the meditation people are attracted to, not the silence," a teacher from the Blackheath centre, Patrick Given-Wilson, says.

He believes the silence stops us making comparisons about a process that is intensely personal.

"Imagine you've just come out of a morning meditation and over lunch someone says, 'I had this amazing

experience,' and you didn't," he says. "It's not helpful.

"What is helpful is the chance to go deeply within. When people go inside, they discover all sorts of things about themselves, things that they were trying to fix intellectually or by negotiation. Often that doesn't work because there's stuff going on inside that's actually at the root of it. Getting to grips with that makes a huge difference."

The Vipassana technique is simple – stay silent, observe the breath and observe the sensations that arise – yet celebrant Patty Kikos says it's surprisingly uncomfortable.

"I'm also a yoga teacher and I meditate, so I thought silence would be a walk in the park," she says. "But I struggled. My body was uncomfortable, which agitated my mind. It showed how uncomfortable I am when I'm not in control."

Kikos says she has found immense value in embracing silence. Her commitment to regular silent retreats eventually carried through into her daily life.

"It's allowed me to be a lot more comfortable with silence," she says. "I didn't welcome it in any shape or form previously. The noises in my head wouldn't stop but now I sit and I'm still and I don't

need to fill the spaces in my day as much. I'm happier."

Silence has also inspired Kikos to reap some practical rewards.

"I was craving a quieter life and had thought about selling my celebrancy business," she says. "But stillness has helped it flourish: my boundaries are clearer and, as a result, the clients I attract are really beautiful people and when I stand there as a celebrant, I'm now genuinely honoured to be there.

"It's led to a general uncluttering; there's now room in my life for abundance, stillness and happiness, in all forms."

Fact file ...

- Ten-day Vipassana courses are run on a donation-only basis. They mean it: as little or as much you can give is OK. See dhamma.org.
- If you meditate at home, a small daily dose is better than a lot once a fortnight. Simply start with five minutes a day, building up over time.
- Practising silence? Try going without TV one night a week.