

## ***MINDFULNESS IN PLAIN ENGLISH***

**By Bhante Gunaratana**

Chapter 1 – Meditation: Why Bother?

Selected Quotes

Meditation is not easy. It takes time and it takes energy. It also takes grit, determination, and discipline. It requires a host of personal qualities that we normally regard as unpleasant and like to avoid whenever possible. We can sum up all these qualities in the American word *gumption*. It is certainly a great deal easier just to sit back and watch television. So why bother?..... Simple. Because you are human. Just because of the simple fact that you are human, you find yourself heir to an inherent unsatisfactoriness in life which simply will not go away. You can suppress it from your awareness for a time; you can distract yourself for hours on end, but it always comes back—and usually when you least expect it. All of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, you sit up, take stock, and realize your actual situation in life.

.....You are just human. And you suffer from the same malady that infects every human being. It is a monster inside all of us, and it has many arms: chronic tension, lack of genuine compassion for others, .....feelings being blocked up, and emotional deadness. Many, many arms. None of us is entirely free from it. We may deny it..... We build a whole culture around hiding from it, pretending that it is not there, and distracting ourselves .....with goals, projects, and status. But it never goes away. It is a constant undercurrent in every thought and every perception, a little....voice in the back of the head that keeps saying, “Not good enough yet. [Need] to have more. [Have] to make it better. [Have] to be better.”

.....The essence of our experience is change. Change is incessant. Moment by moment life flows by, and it is never the same. Perpetual alteration is the essence of the perceptual universe. A thought springs up in your head and half a second later, it is gone. In comes another, and then that is gone too. A sound strikes your ears, and then silence. Open your eyes and the world pours in, blink and it is gone. People come into your life and they leave again. Friends go, relatives die. Your fortunes go up, and they go down. Sometimes you win, and just as often you lose. It is incessant: change, change, change; no two moments every the same.

There is nothing wrong with this. It is the nature of the universe. But human culture has taught us some odd responses to this endless flowing. We categorize experiences. We try to stick each perception, every mental change in this endless flow, in to one of three mental pigeon holes: it is good, ....bad, or ....neutral. Then, according to which box we stick it in, we perceive with a set of fixed habitual mental responses. If a particular perception has been labeled “good,” then we try to freeze time right there. We grab onto that particular thought, ....fondle it, ...hold it, and we try to keep it from escaping. When that does not work, we go all-out in an effort to repeat the experience that caused the thought. Let us call this mental habit “grasping.”

On the other side of the mind lies the box labeled “bad.” When we perceive something “bad,” we try to ..... deny it, reject it, and get rid of it any way we can. We fight against our own experience. We run from pieces of ourselves. Let us call this mental habit “rejecting.” Between these two reactions lies the neutral box. Here we place the experiences that are neither good nor bad. They are tepid, ... uninteresting, and boring. We pack experience away in the neutral box so that we can ignore it and thus return our attention to where the action is, namely, our endless round of desire and aversion. This category of experience gets robbed of its fair share of your attention. Let us call this mental habit “ignoring.” The direct result of all this lunacy is a perpetual treadmill race to nowhere, endlessly pounding after pleasure, endlessly fleeing from pain, and endlessly ignoring 90% of our experience.

.....“Suffering” is a big word in Buddhist thought. It is a key term and should be thoroughly understood. The Pali word is *dukkha*, and it does not just mean the agony of the body. It means that deep, subtle sense of dissatisfaction that is a part of every mind moment and which results directly from the mental treadmill.

.....Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? Luckily, it's not: not at all. It only sounds bleak when you view it from the level of ordinary mental perspective, the very level at which the treadmill mechanism operates. [Underneath] lies another perspective, a completely different way to look at the universe. It is a level of functioning where the mind does not try to freeze time, .....[does] not grasp onto our experience as it flows by, and does not try to block things out and ignore them. It is a level of experience beyond good and bad, beyond pleasure and pain. It is a lovely way to perceive the world, and it is learnable skill.

Meditation is called the Great Teacher. It is the cleansing crucible fire that works slowly through understanding. The greater your understanding, the more flexible and tolerant, the more compassionate you can be. ....When you have learned compassion for yourself, compassion for others is automatic. An accomplished meditator has achieved a profound understanding of life, and he or she inevitably relates to the world with a deep and uncritical love.

.....The purpose of meditation is personal transformation. The “you” that goes in one side of the meditation experience is not the same “you” that comes out the other side. Meditation changes your character by a process of sensitization, by making you deeply aware of your own thoughts, words, and deeds. ....meditation properly performed prepares you to meet the ups and downs of existence. It reduces your tension, fear and worry. Restlessness recedes and passion moderates. Things begin to fall into place and your life becomes a glide instead of a struggle. All this happens through understanding.

Meditation sharpens your concentration and your thinking power. Then, piece by piece, your own subconscious motives and mechanics become clear to you. .... There is only one way you will ever know if meditation is worth the effort. ....See for yourself.