

Mindfulness in Plain English
Bhante Gunaratana
Chapter 2 “What Meditation Isn’t”
Selected Quotes

There are many books on the subject of meditation. Most of them are written from a point of view that lies squarely within one particular religious or philosophical tradition, and many of the authors have not bothered to point this out. They make statements about meditation that sound like general laws but are actually highly specific procedures exclusive to that particular system of practice.....This book is specific. We are going to teach you to watch the functioning of your own mind in a calm and detached manner so you can gain insight into your own behavior. The goal is awareness, awareness so intense, concentrated, and finely tuned that you will be able to pierce the inner workings of reality itself. We are going to take these misconceptions one at a time and dissolve them.

Misconception 1

Meditation Is Just a Relaxation Technique.

The bugaboo here is *just*. Relaxation is a key component of meditation, but vipassana-style meditation aims at a much loftier goal.All meditation procedures stress concentration of the mind, bringing the mind to rest on one item or one area of thought. Do it strongly and thoroughly enough, and you achieve a deep and blissful relaxation, called *jhana*. It is a state of such supreme tranquility that it amounts to rapture.... Most systems stop right there. *Jhana* is the goal, and when you attain that, you simply repeat the experience for the rest of your life. Not so with Vipassana meditation. Vipassana seeks another goal - awareness. Concentration and realization are considered necessary concomitants to awareness. They are required precursors, handy tools, and beneficial by products. But they are not the goal. The goal is insight. Vipassana meditation is a profound ... practice aimed at nothing less than the purification and transformation of your everyday life.

Misconception 2

Meditation Means Going Into a Trance.

Here again the statement could be applied accurately to certain systems of meditation, but not to Vipassana. Insight meditation is not a form of hypnosis. You are not trying to black out your mind so as to become unconscious, or trying to turn yourself into an emotionless vegetable. If anything, the reverse is true. You will become more and more attuned to your own emotional changes. You will learn to know yourself with every greatly clarity and precision. In learning this technique, certain states do occur that may appear trancelike to the observer. But they are really the opposite. In hypnotic trance, the subject is susceptible to control by another party, whereas in deep concentration, the meditator remains very much under his or her own control. As we have said, the deep concentration of *jhana* is simply a tool or stepping stone on the route to heightened awareness. Vipassana, by definition, is the cultivation of mindfulness or awareness.

Misconception 3

Meditation is a mysterious practice that cannot be understood.

Here again, this is almost true, but not quite. Meditation deals with levels of consciousness that lie deeper than conceptual thought. Therefore, some of the experiences of meditation just won't fit into words. That does not mean, however,

that meditation cannot be understood. There are deeper ways to understand things than by the use of words. You understand how to walk. You probably can't describe the exact order in which your nerve fibers and your muscles contract during that process. But you can do it. Meditation needs to be understood that same way, by doing it. It is not something that you can learn in abstract terms, or something to be talked about. It is something to be experienced. Meditation is not a mindless formula that gives automatic and predictable results. You can never really predict exactly what will come up during any particular session. It is an investigation and an experiment, and adventure every time. Learning to look at each second as if it were the first and only second in the universe is essential in Vipassana meditation.

Misconception 4

The purpose of meditation is to become...psychic.....

No. The purpose of meditation is to develop awareness. The goal is liberation..... There is a link between psychic phenomena and meditation, but the relationship is complex. During early stages of the meditator's career, such phenomena may or may not arise. Some people may experience some intuitive understanding or memories from past lives; others do not....these phenomena are not regarded as well developed and reliable psychic abilities, and they should not be given undue importance. Such phenomena are in fact fairly dangerous to new meditators in that they are quite seductive. They can be an ego trap, pulling you right off track. Your best approach is not to place any emphasis on these phenomena. If they come up, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine too....If voices and visions pop up, just notice them and let them go. Don't get involved.

Misconception 5

Meditation is dangerous, and a prudent person should avoid it.

Everything is dangerous. Walk across the street and you may get hit by a bus....Meditate, and you will probably dredge up various nasty matters from your past. The suppressed material that has been buried for quite some time can be scary. But exploring it is also highly profitable. No activity is entirely without risk, but that does not mean that we should wrap ourselves in a protective cocoon. That is not living but premature death. The way to deal with danger is to know approximately how much of it there is, where it is likely to be found, and how to deal with it when it arises.....Vipassana is development of awareness. That in itself is not dangerous; on the contrary, increased awareness is a safeguard against danger. Properly done, meditation is a very gentle and gradual process. Take it slow and easy, the development of your practice will occur very naturally. Nothing should be forced.

Misconception 6

Meditation is for saints and holy men, not for regular people.

This attitude is very prevalent in Asia, where monks and holy men are accorded an enormous amount of ritualized reverence, somewhat akin to the American attitude of idolizing movie stars and baseball heroes. There are three integral factors in Buddhist meditation-morality, concentration, and wisdom. These three factors grow together as your practice deepens. Each one influences the other, so you cultivate the three of them at once, not separately. Meditation teaches you how to disentangle yourself from the thought process. It is the mental art of stepping out of your own way, and that's a useful skill in everyday life. Meditation is a practical skill that focuses on everyday events and has immediate application in everybody's life. Meditation is not other-worldly.

Misconception 7

Meditation is Running Away from Reality.

Incorrect. Meditation is running straight into reality. It does not insulate you from the pain of life but rather allows you to delve so deeply into life and all its aspects that you pierce the pain barrier and go beyond suffering. Vipassana is a practice done with the specific intention of facing reality...It allows you to blow aside the illusions and free yourself from all the polite little lies you tell yourself all the time.

Misconception 8

Meditation is a Great Way to Get High.

Well, yes and no. Meditation does produce lovely blissful feelings sometimes. But they are not the purpose, and they don't always occur. Furthermore, if you do meditation with just that purpose in mind, they are less likely to occur. Bliss results from relaxation, and relaxation results from release of tension. Seeking bliss from meditation introduces tension into the process, which blows the whole chain of events. Euphoria is not the purpose of meditation. Still, it is a very pleasant side effect, and becomes more frequent the longer you meditate

Misconception 9

Meditation is Selfish.

It certainly looks that way. There sits the meditator parked on a little cushion. Why is she doing this? The meditator's intention is to purge her own mind of anger, prejudice, and ill will, and she is actively engaged in the process of getting rid of greed, tension, and insensitivity. Those are the very items that obstruct her compassion for others.

Misconception 10

When you Meditate, You Sit Around Thinking Lofty Thoughts.

Wrong again. There are certain systems of contemplation in which this sort of thing is done. But that is not Vipassana. Vipassana is the practice of awareness, awareness of whatever is there, be it supreme truth or trivial trash. Vipassana is a simple practice. It consists of experiencing your own life directly, without preferences and without mental images pasted onto them. Vipassana is seeing our life unfold from moment to moment without biases.

Misconception 11

A Couple of Weeks of Meditation And All My Problems Will Go Away.

Sorry, meditation is not a quick cure-all. You will start seeing changes right away, but really profound effects are years down the line.....At each sitting you gain some results, but they are often very subtle. They occur deep within the mind, and only manifest much later. Patience is the key. Patience is essential for any profound change. If you learn nothing else from meditation, you will learn patience. And that is the most valuable lesson available.