

Mindfulness in Plain English
Bhante Gunaratana
Chapter 3 “What Meditation Is”
Selected Quotes

“Every culture on earth.... has produced some sort of mental practice which might be termed meditation. It all depends on how loose a definition you give to that word.....Within the Judeo-Christian tradition we find 2 overlapping practices called prayer and contemplation. Prayer is a direct address to a spiritual entity. Contemplation is a prolonged period of conscious thought about a specific topic, usually a religious ideal or scriptural passage.Both of these activities are exercises in concentration.In the Hindu tradition... yogic meditation is also purely concentrative.... Within the Buddhist tradition, concentration is also highly valued...Yet a new element is added and more highly stressed... awareness, using concentration as a tool.

.....Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. It is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years..... a gentle technique.....very, very thorough. It is attentive listening, mindful seeing and careful testing. We learn to smell acutely, to touch fully, and really pay attention to the changes taking place in all these experiences. We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them. The object of Vipassana practice is to learn to see the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of all phenomena.

Vipassana means looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through so as to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing....We train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is, and we call this special mode of perception mindfulness.

.....We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those mental objects for the reality. We spend all of our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears.....When you relax your driving desire for comfort, real fulfillment arises. When you drop your hectic pursuit of gratification, the real beauty of life comes out. When you seek to know the reality without illusion, complete with all its pain and danger, that is when real freedom and security are yours.

The fundamental attitude of Buddhism is intensely empirical and anti-authoritarian. Gotama the Buddha did not offer his teaching as a set of dogmas, but rather as a set of propositions for each individual to investigate for himself..... He said “Come and see” and “Place no head above your own.” Insight meditation is essentially a practice of investigative personal discovery.....The process of change is constant and eternal.....You can learn to perceive your life as an ever-flowing movement.....learning this is just a matter of time and training.

Our human perceptual habits are remarkably stupid in some ways. We tune out 99% of all the sensory stimuli we actually receive, and we solidify the remainder into discrete mental objects. Then we react to those mental objects in programmed

habitual ways. [Bante G uses example of dog barking and all the self-chatter and judgments that may arise from hearing the sound. He calls them “just perceptual and mental habits.”] The first step is to realize what you are doing, as you are doing it, to stand back and quietly watch.

....Up pops a perception. It could be anything [our morning alarm going off, the moon rising]. Whatever it is, the very next thing we do is to react to the stimulus with a feeling about it...Take worry.....a process.....with steps. The first link of the worry chain is the grasping-rejecting reaction. As soon as a phenomenon pops into the mind, we try mentally to grab onto it or push it away. That sets the worry response in motion.

Vipassana meditation teaches us how to scrutinize our own perceptual process with great precision. We learn to watch the arising of thought and perception with a feeling of serene detachment. We learn to view our own reactions to stimuli with calm and clarity. We begin to see ourselves reacting without getting caught up in the reactions themselves. The obsessive nature of thought slowly dies. This escape from the obsessive nature of thought produces a whole new view of reality. It is a complete paradigm shift, a total change in the perceptual mechanism. It brings with it the bliss of emancipation from obsessions.... This is called seeing things as they really are.”