

Mindfulness in Plain English

Bhante Gunaratana

Introduction

The subject of this book is Vipassana meditation practice. Repeat, practice. This is a mediation manual, a nuts-and-bolts, step-by-step guide to Insight Meditation. It is meant to be practical. It is meant for use.....

There are many styles of meditation. Every major religious tradition has some sort of procedure which they call meditation.....Please understand that this volume deals exclusively with the Vipassana style of meditation as taught and practiced in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism. It is often translated as Insight meditation, since the purpose of this system is to give the meditator insight into the nature of reality and accurate understanding of how everything works.

Buddhism as a whole is quite different from the theological religions with which Westerners are most familiar. It is a direct entrance to a spiritual or divine realm without addressing deities or other “agents.” Its flavor is intensely clinical, much more akin to what we would call psychology than to what we would usually call religion. It is an ever-ongoing investigation of reality, a microscopic examination of the very process of perception. Its intention is to pick apart the screen of lies and delusions through which we normally view the world, and thus to reveal the face of ultimate reality. Vipassana meditation is an ancient and elegant technique for doing just that.

Theravada Buddhism presents us with an effective system for exploring the deeper levels of the mind, down to the very root of consciousness itself.....

In this volume we will make every effort to separate the ornamental from the fundamental and to present only the naked plain truth itself. Those readers who are of a ritualistic bent may investigate the Theravada practice in other books, and will find there a vast wealth of customs and ceremony, a rich tradition full of beauty and significance. Those of a more clinical bent may use just the techniques themselves, applying them within whichever philosophical and emotional context they wish. The practice is the thing.

.....Buddhism addresses two major types of mediation. They are different mental skills, modes of functioning or qualities of consciousness. In Pali, the original language of Theravada literature, they are called ‘Vipassana’ and ‘Samatha’.

‘Vipassana’ can be translated as ‘insight’, a clear awareness of exactly what is happening as it happens. ‘Samatha’ can be translated as ‘concentration’ or ‘tranquility.’ It is a state in which the mind is brought to rest, focused only on one item and not allowed to wander. When this is done, a deep calm pervades body and mind, a state of tranquility which must be experienced to be understood. Most systems of meditation emphasize the Samatha component. The meditator focuses his mind upon some items, such as prayer, a chant, a candle flame.....and excludes all other thoughts or perceptions from his consciousness. The result is a state of rapture which lasts until the meditator ends the session of sitting. It is beautiful, delightful, meaningful and alluring, but only temporary. Vipassana meditation addresses the other component, insight.

The Vipassana meditator uses his concentration as a tool by which his awareness can chip away at the wall of illusion which cuts him off from the living light of reality. It is a gradual process of ever-increasing awareness of the inner workings of reality itself. It takes years, but one day the meditator chisels through the wall and tumbles into the presence of light. The transformation is complete. It’s called liberation. Liberation is the goal of all Buddhist systems of practice. But the routes to the attainment of that end are quite diverse.

There are an enormous number of distinct sects within Buddhism. But they divide into two broad streams of thought—Mahayana and Theravada. Mahayana Buddhism prevails throughout East Asia, shaping the cultures of China, Korea, Japan, Nepal, Tibet, and Vietnam.

The most widely known of the Mahayana systems is Zen, practiced mainly in Japan, Korea, Vietnam and the United States. The Theravada system of practice prevails in South and Southeast Asia in the countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia. This book deals with Theravada practice.

The traditional Theravada literature describes the techniques of both Samatha (concentration and tranquility of mind) and Vipassana (insight or clear awareness). There are forty different subjects of meditation described in the Pali literature. They are recommended as objects of concentration and as subjects of investigation leading to insight. But this is a basic manual, and we limit our discussion to the most fundamental of those recommended objects—breathing. This book is an introduction to the attainment of mindfulness through bare attention to, and clear comprehension of, the whole process of breathing. Using the breath as [one's] primary focus of attention, the meditator applies participatory observation to the entirety of [one's] own perceptual universe. He learns to watch changes in all physical experiences, in feelings and in perceptions. He learns to study his own mental activities and the fluctuations in the character of consciousness itself. All of these changes are occurring perpetually and are present in every moment of our experience.

Meditation is a living activity, an inherently experiential activity. It cannot be taught as a purely scholastic subject.....

It is our intention to present you with the clearest and most concise directions for Vipassana meditation available in the English language. This book offers you a foot in the door. It's up to you to take the first few steps on the road to the discovery of who you are and what it all means. It is a journey worth taking. We wish you success.

Buddha's Brain by Rick Hanson

Chapter 1 "The Self-Transforming Brain"

(These ideas are a combination of direct quotes and edits for simplicity)

Three Survival Strategies

Over hundreds of millions of years of evolution, our ancestors developed three fundamental strategies for survival:

- Creating separations—in order to form boundaries between themselves and the world... between one mental state and another.
- Maintaining stability—in order to keep physical and mental systems in a healthy balance.
- Approaching opportunities and avoiding threats—in order to gain things that promote offspring, and escape or resist those things that don't.

To motivate animals, including ourselves, to follow these strategies and pass on their genes, neural networks evolved to create pain and distress under certain conditions: when separations break down, stability is shaken, opportunities disappoint, and threats loom. Unfortunately, these conditions happen all the time because:

- Everything is connected
- Everything keeps changing
- Opportunities routinely remain unfulfilled or lose their luster, and many threats are inescapable (e.g., aging and death)