

Mindfulness in Plain English
Bhante Gunaratana
Chapter 5 “The Practice”
Selected Quotes

“Although there are many subjects of meditation, we strongly recommend that you start with focusing your undivided attention on your breathing to gain some degree of basic concentration....You want to cultivate mindfulness culminating in the insight and wisdom to realize the truth as it is. You want to know the workings of your body-mind complex exactly as they are. You want opt get rid of all psychological annoyances to make your life truly peaceful and happy.

The mind cannot be purified without seeing things as they really are.

When we use this phrase in reference to insight gained from meditation...we do not mean seeing things superficially, with our regular eyes, but seeing thing as they are in themselves, with wisdom. Seeing with wisdom means seeing things within the framework of our body-mind complex without prejudices or biases that spring from greed, hatred and delusion.

When we mindfully watch our bodily sensations, we should not confuse them with mental formations, for bodily sensation can arise completely independent of the mind. For instance, we sit comfortably. After a while, there can arise some uncomfortable feeling in our back or legs. Our mind immediately experiences that discomfort and forms numerous thoughts around the feeling. At that point, without confusing the feeling with the mental formations, we should isolate the feeling as feeling and watch it mindfully. Feeling is one of the seven universal mental factors. The other six are contact, perception, attention, concentration life force and volition.

Other times, a certain emotion, such as resentment fear, or lust, may arise. During these times we should watch the emotion exactly as it is, without confusing it with anything else. When we bundle our aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness into one and regard all of them as a feeling, we get confused because the source of the feeling becomes obscured. If we simply dwell upon the feeling without separating it form other mental factors, our realization of truth becomes very difficult.

We want to gain insight into the experience of impermanence to overcome our unhappiness and ignorance: our deeper knowledge of unhappiness overcomes the greed that causes our unhappiness, and our realization of selflessness overcomes the ignorance that arises from the notion itself.

By sitting in one place, we may gain some degree of mindfulness. Going to a retreat and spending several days or several months watching our feelings, perceptions, countless, thoughts, and various states of consciousness may make us eventually calm and peaceful. But normally we do not have that much time to spend in one place, meditating all the time. Therefore, we should find a way to apply our mindfulness to our daily lives in order for us to be able to handle daily unforeseeable eventualities.

What we face every day is unpredictable. Things happened due to multiple causes and conditions, since we live in a conditional and impermanent world. Mindfulness is our

emergency kit, readily available at any time. When we face a situation in which we feel indignation, if we mindfully investigate our own mind, we will discover truths about ourselves: for example, that we are selfish; we are egocentric; we are attached to our ego; we hold on to our opinions; we think we are right and everybody else is wrong; we are prejudiced; we are biased; and at the bottom of all of this, we do not really love ourselves. This discovery, though bitter, is a most rewarding experience. And in the long run, this discovery delivers us from deeply rooted psychological and spiritual suffering.

Mindfulness practice is the practice of being 100 percent honest with ourselves. When we watch our own mind and body, we notice certain things that are unpleasant or realize. Since we do not like them, we reject them. What are the things we do not like? We do not like to detach from loved ones or to live with unloved ones. We include people, places, and material things into our likes and dislikes, but opinions, ideas, beliefs, and decisions as well. We do not like what naturally happens to us. We do not like, for instance, growing old, becoming sick, becoming weak or showing our age, for we have a great desire to preserve our appearance.

When greed, hatred, and ignorance reveal themselves in our daily lives, we use our mindfulness to track them down and comprehend their roots. The root of each of these mental states is within ourselves.

Think of it this way: if we are sick, we must find out the cause of our sickness. Only then can we get treatment. If we pretend that we are not sick, even though we are suffering, we will never get treatment. Similarly, if we think that we don't have these faults, we will never clear our spiritual path. If we are blind to our own flaws, we need someone to point them out to us. When they point out our faults, we should be grateful to them...

Of course, the person pointing out our mistakes may not be totally free from defects...but he can see our faults just as we can see hers...Both pointing out shortcomings and responding to someone pointing out shortcomings should be done mindfully. If someone becomes unmindful in indicating faults and uses unkind and harsh language, he might do more harm than good to himself as well as to the person whose shortcomings he points out.

OUR GOAL

As meditators, we all must have a goal, for if we do not, and blindly follow somebody's instructions on meditation, we will simply be groping in the dark.

Our goal is to reach the perfection of all the noble and wholesome qualities latent in our subconscious mind. This goal has five elements to it: purification of mind, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, overcoming pain and grief, treading the right path leading to attainment of eternal peace, and attaining happiness by following that path.

PRACTICE

Once you sit, do not change the position again until the end of the time you determined at the beginning. Suppose you change your original position because it is uncomfortable....after a while the new position becomes uncomfortable. Then you want another and after a while it, too, becomes uncomfortable. So you may go on shifting....changing one position to another the whole time you are on your meditation cushion and you may not gain a deep and meaningful level of concentration.

To avoid changing your position, determine at the beginning of meditation how long you are going to meditate. If you have never meditated before, sit motionlessly for not longer than twenty minutes.

We should not have a time schedule to attain our goal, for our attainment depends on how we progress in our practice based on our understanding and development of our spiritual faculties.

After sitting motionlessly, close your eyes. Our mind is analogous to a cup of muddy water. The longer you keep a cup of muddy water still, the more the mud settles down and the water will be clear. Similarly, if you keep quiet without moving your body, focusing your entire undivided attention on the subject of your meditation, your mind settles down and begins to experience the bliss of meditation.

To prepare for this....we should keep our mind in the present moment. The present moment is changing so fast that a casual observer does not seem to notice its existence at all. Every moment is a moment of events and no moment passes by without an event. Therefore, the moment we try to pay bare attention to is the present moment.

The mind can never be focused without a mental object. Therefore we must give our mind an object that is readily available every present moment. One such object is the breath.

After sitting in the manner described and having shared your loving friendliness with everybody, take three deep breaths. After taking three deep breath, breath normally, letting your breath flow in and out freely. Simply notice the feeling of the breath....

Do not verbalize or conceptualize anything. Simply notice the incoming and outgoing breath without saying, "I breathe in," or "I breathe out." When you focus your attention on the breath, ignore any thought, memory, sound, smell, taste, etc., and focus your attention exclusively on the breath....

At the beginning, both inhalations and exhalations are short because the body and mind are not calm and relaxed. Notice the feeling of that short inhaling and short exhaling as they occur....As you continue to notice the feeling ...your body and mind become relatively calm. Then your breath becomes long. Notice the feeling....notice the entire breathing process from the beginning to the end. Subsequently the breath becomes subtle, and the mind and body become calmer than before.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE MIND WANDERS

In spite of your concerted effort to keep the mind on your breathing, the mind will likely wander away. It may go to past experiences, and suddenly you may find yourself remembering places you've visited, people you met, friends not seen for a long time, a book you read long ago....and so on. As soon as you notice that your mind is no longer on the breath, mindfully bring it back and anchor it there. Following are some suggestions to help you gain the concentration necessary for the practice of mindfulness.

1. Counting

In a situation like this, counting may help. The purpose of counting is simply to focus the mind on the breath. Once your mind is focused on the breath, give up counting. This is a device for gaining concentration. There are numerous ways of counting.

2. Connecting

After inhaling do not wait to notice the brief pause before exhaling but connect the inhaling with the exhaling, so you notice both inhaling and exhaling as one breath.

3. Fixing

After joining inhaling with exhaling, fix your mind on the point where you feel your inhaling and exhaling breath touching. Inhale and exhale as one single breath moving in and out touching or rubbing the rims of your nostrils.

4. Focus your mind like a gatekeeper

A gatekeeper does not take into account any detail of the people entering a house. All he does is notice people entering the house and leaving the house through the gate. Similarly, when you concentrate you should not take into account any detail of your experiences. Simply notice the feeling of your inhaling and exhaling breath as it goes in and out right at the rims of your nostrils.

Farmer Simile

Suppose there is a farmer who uses buffaloes for plowing his rice field. As he is tired in the middle of the day, he unfastens his buffaloes and takes a rest under the cool shade of a tree. When he wakes up, he does not find his animals. He does not worry, but simply walks to the water place where all the animals gather for drinking in the hot midday, and he finds his buffaloes there. Without any problem he brings them back and ties them to the yoke again and starts plowing his field.

Similarly, as you continue this exercise, your breath becomes so subtle and refined that you might not be able to notice the feeling of breath at all. When this happens do not worry. It has not disappeared. It is still where it was before—right at the nostril tips. Take a few quick breaths and you will notice the feeling of breathing again.

As you keep your mind focused on the rims of your nostrils, you will be able to notice the sign of the development of meditation. You will feel the pleasant sensation of a sign. Different meditators experience this differently. It will be like a star, or a round gem, or a round pearl, or a cotton seed, or a peg made of heartwood, or a long string or a wreath of flowers, or a puff of smoke etc.

Earlier in your practice you had inhaling and exhaling as objects of meditation. Now you have the sign as the third object of meditation. When you focus your mind on this third object, your mind reaches a state of concentration sufficient for your practice of insight meditation. Unite the mind with this sign that is available in the present moment and let the mind flow with every succeeding moment. As you pay bare attention to it, you will see that the sign itself is changing every moment. Keep your mind with the changing moments. Also, notice that your mind can be concentrated only on the present moment. The unity of the mind with the present moment is called momentary concentration.

To make any kind of progress in insight meditation you need this kind of momentary concentration...because everything in your experience lives only for one moment.

As your mindfulness develops, your resentment for the change, your dislike for the unpleasant experiences, your greed for the pleasant experiences, and the notion of selfhood will be replaced by the deeper awareness of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

This knowledge of reality in your experience helps you to foster a more calm, peaceful, and mature attitude toward your life.

When the mind is united with the breath flowing all the time, we will naturally be able to focus the mind on the present moment. We can notice the feeling arising from contact of breath with the rim of our nostrils.

Also, we feel the expansion and contraction of our lungs, abdomen....as the fresh air is pumped in and out of the lungs....the expansion and contraction is part of the universal rhythm. Everything in the universe has the same rhythm of expansion and contraction just like our breath and body.

Along with the inhaled breath, we experience a small degree of calmness. This little degree of calmness turns into tension if we don't breathe out in a few moments.

...if we watch our breathing without desiring calmness and without resenting the tension arising from breathing in and out, and experience only the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of our breath, our mind becomes peaceful and calm.

The mind does not stay all the time with the feeling of the breath. It goes to sounds, memories, emotions, perceptions, consciousness, and mental formations as well. When we experience these states, we should forget about the feeling of breath and immediately focus our attention on these states, one at a time...As they fade away, we let our mind return to the breath, which is the home base the mind can return to from quick or long journeys to various states of mind and body.

Every time the mind returns to the breath, it comes back with a deeper insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. The mind becomes more insightful from the impartial and unbiased watching of these occurrences. The mind gains insight into the fact that this body, these feelings, the various states of consciousness and numerous mental formations are to be used only for the purpose of gaining deeper insight in the reality of this body-mind complex.