

Mindfulness in Plain English
Bhante Gunaratana
Chapter 7 “What to do with your Mind”
Selected Quotes

“The method [of meditation] we are explaining here is considered the most traditional and is probably what Gotama Buddha taught his students. The *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha’s original discourse on mindfulness, specifically says that one must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise.

.....why use any focus of attention at all [to develop awareness]? Why not just sit down and be aware of whatever happens to be present in the mind? there are meditations of that naturethey are quite difficult. Thought is an inherently complicated procedure. We become stuck in the thought chain.... There is a difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought.....It is primarily a matter of feeling or texture. A thought you are aware of with bare attention feels light in texture; there is a sense of distance between that thought and the awareness viewing it. It arises lightly like a bubble, and it passes away without necessarily giving rise to the next thought in that chain. Normal conscious thought is much heavier in texture. It is ponderous, commanding, and compulsive. By its very nature it is obsessional, and it leads straight to the next thought in the chain, with apparently no gap between them..... Conscious thought sets up a corresponding tension in the body, such as muscular contraction or a quickening of the heartbeat....Concentration is one of the tools needed to be able to see the difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought.

Deep concentration has the effect of slowing down the thought process and speeding up the awareness viewing it. Without a fixed reference point [a focus of attention], you get lost, overcome by the ceaseless waves of change flowing within the mind. We use breath as our focus. Distraction cannot be seen as distraction unless there is some central focus.

Why choose breathing as the primary object of meditation? An object of meditation should promote mindfulness; be portable; easily available; cheap; will not embroil us in those states of mind from which we are trying to free ourselves, such as greed, anger, and delusion. It’s a non-conceptual, [non-thinking] process, of constant change, moving in cycles,we share it with all other living beings.....It’s a present-time experience, always in the here-and-now. When we truly observe the breath,we are pulled out of the morass of mental images and into a bare experience of the here-and-now.

First find the breath.....Make no attempt to control the breath. This is not a breathing exercise of the sort done in yoga. Focus on the natural and spontaneous movement of the breath.....Watch the delicate interrelation between the breath, the impulse to control the breath, and the impulse to cease controlling the breath.....Eventually you will feel no impulse to manipulate it. At this point you will have learned a major lesson about your own compulsive need to control the universe.

Breathing is actually a complex and fascinating procedure...Don’t observe just the bare outline of the breath. There is more to see than just an in-breath and an out-breath. Every breath has a beginning, middle and end. Every inhalation goes through a process of birth, growth, and death and every exhalation does the same. The depth and speed of your breathing changes according to your emotional state, the thought that flows through your mind, and the sounds you hear. Study these phenomena. You will find them fascinating.....This does not mean that you should be sitting there having little conversations with yourself: “There is a short ragged breath... I wonder what’s

next?"Simply note the phenomena and return your attention to the sensation of the breath.

When you first begin this procedure, expect to face some difficulties. Your mind will wander off constantly, darting around like a bumble bee and zooming off on wild tangents. Try not to worry. The monkey mind phenomenon is well known. ...When it happens, just note the fact that you have been thinking, day-dreaming, worrying, or whatever. Gently, but firmly, without getting upset or judging yourself for straying, simply return to the simple physical sensation of the breath. Then do it again the next time, and again, and again, and again.

Somewhere in this process, you will come face to face with the sudden and shocking realization that you are completely crazy. Your mind is a shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control and hopeless. No problem. You are not crazier than you were yesterday. It has always been this way, and you just never noticed. The very fact that you have looked at the problem straight [on] means that you are on your way up and out of it.

In the wordless observation of the breath, there are two states to be avoided: thinking and sinking. The thinking mind manifests most clearly as the monkey mind..... The sinking mind is almost the reverse.Sinking mind denotes any dimming of awareness.It is sort of a mental vacuum in which there is no thought, no awareness of anything,.....a formless mental gray area rather like a dreamless sleep. Sinking mind is a void... Vipassana meditation is an active function. Concentration is a strong, energetic attention to one single item. Awareness is a bright clean alertness. Sinking mind contains neither. When you have fallen into the state of sinking mind, just note the fact and return your attention to the sensation of breathing. [VIMS teacher note: you could also open your eyes, shift your posture to become more erect while sitting, stand up, change your object of meditation to something that may be more stimulating, such as hearing.]

At the end of a well-done meditation session you will feel a delightful freshness of mind. It is a peaceful, buoyant, and joyous energy which you can then apply to the problems of daily living. This in itself is reward enough. The purpose of meditation is not to deal with problems,.....problem-solving ability is a fringe benefit. Take a break from worrying and planning. Let your meditation be a complete vacation. Trust your own ability to deal with these issues later, using the energy and freshness of mind that you built up during your meditation.

Don't set goals for yourself that are too high to reach. Be gentle with yourself. You are trying to follow your own breathing continuously and without a break. ...Take time in small units. At the beginning of an inhalation, make the resolve to follow the breath just for the period of that one inhalation. Even this is not so easy, but at least it can be done. Then, at the start of the exhalation, resolve to follow the breath just for that one exhalation, all the way through. You will still fail repeatedly, but keep at it.

Mindfulness of breathing is a present-time awareness. When you are doing it properly, you are aware only of what is occurring in the present. You don't look back, and you don't look forward. You forget about the last breath, and you don't anticipate the next one.This meditation is a process of retaining the mind. The state you are aiming for is one in which you are totally aware of everything that is happening in your own perceptual universe, exactly the way it happens, exactly when it is happening: total, unbroken awareness in present time. This is an incredibly high goal.....It takes practice, so we start small....one small unit of time, just one single inhalation. And, when you succeed, you are on your way to a whole new experience of life.