

Mindfulness in Plain English

Bhante Gunaratana

Chapter 9 "Set-up Exercises" Selected Quotes

In Theravada Buddhist countries, it is traditional to begin each meditation session with the recitation of a certain set of formulas. These...have been devised and refined by.... pragmatic and dedicated men and women, and they have a thoroughly practical purpose. They are worthy of deeper inspection.

The Buddha was considered contrary in his own day. He was born into an intensely ritualized society, and his ideas appear thoroughly iconoclastic to the established hierarchy of his own era. On numerous occasions, he disavowed the use of rituals for their own sake... This does not mean that ritual has no use. It means that ritual by itself, performed strictly for its own sake, will not get you out of the trap. If you believe that mere recitation of words will save you, then you only increase your own dependence on words and concepts. This moves you away from the wordless perception of reality rather than toward it. They are not prayers, and they are not mantras. They are not magical incantations. They are psychological cleansing devices that require active mental participation...

The Threefold Guidance

Meditation is a tough job. It is an inherently solitary activity. One person battles against enormously powerful forces, part of the very structure of the mind doing the meditating. When you really get into it, you will eventually find yourself confronted with a shocking realization....What you are struggling to pierce looks like a solid wall...you say to yourself..."That? I am supposed to get past that? if I take that away the whole world will fall apart..."

It is a very scary feeling -a very lonely feeling. To counteract this feeling, it is useful to know that you are not alone. Others ...have...pushed their way through to the light. They have laid out the rules by which the job can be done...The Buddha found his way through...and after him came many others. He left clear instructions in the form of the Dhamma.

Universal Loving Friendliness

Vipassana meditation is an exercise in mindfulness...an egoless awareness. It is a procedure in which the ego will be eradicated by the penetrating gaze of mindfulness...as mindfulness watches the ego function, it penetrates to the roots of the mechanics of ego...Mindfulness is egoless awareness. If we start with ego in full control, how do we put enough mindfulness there at the beginning to get the job done? There is always some mindfulness present in every moment. The real problem is to gather enough of it to be effective. We...weaken those aspects of ego that do the most harm so that mindfulness will have less resistance....

Greed and hatred are the prime manifestations of the ego process. To the extent that grasping and rejecting are present in the mind, mindfulness will have a very rough time. There is only so much time in a day, and your meditation minutes are precious. The Theravada tradition has developed a useful tool...to remove these barriers from your mind at least temporarily, so that you can get on with the job of removing their roots permanently.

You can use one idea to cancel another. You can balance a negative emotion by instilling a positive one. Giving is the opposite of greed. Benevolence is the opposite of hatred...A liberated person will..be generous and benevolent...She will be so purely as a manifestation of her own basic nature, which is no longer inhibited by ego. This is a psychological medicine.

You start by banishing thoughts of self-hatred and self-condemnation. You allow good feelings and good wishes first to flow to yourself...Then you do the same for those people closest to you. Gradually, you work outward from your own circle of intimates until you can direct a flow of those same emotions to your enemies and to all living beings everywhere...this can be a powerful and transformative exercise...

Once you have completed these recitations, lay aside all your troubles and conflicts for the period of practice.

The practice of universal loving friendliness is also recommended for bedtime and just after arising.

The most damaging psychic irritant arising in the mind...is resentment. This...can cause you uneasiness, tension, agitation, and worry. You might not be able to go on sitting...we strongly recommend that you should start your meditation with generating loving friendliness.

You may wonder, how we can wish: *'May my enemies be well, happy, and peaceful; may no difficulties come to them...'*

You must remember that you practice loving friendliness for the purification of your own mind, just as you practice meditation for your own attainment of peace and liberation from pain and suffering. As you practice loving friendliness...you can behave in a most friendly manner without biases, discrimination, or hate. Your noble behavior enables you to help others in a most practical manner to reduce their pain and suffering. It is compassionate people who can help others.

Remember that your thoughts are transformed into speech and action in order to bring the expected result. Thought translated into action is capable of producing a tangible result. You should always speak and do things with mindfulness of loving friendliness.

Practically speaking, if all of your enemies were free from problems, pain, suffering, affliction, neurosis, psychosis, paranoia, fear, tension, anxiety, etc. they would not be your enemies. The practical approach toward your enemies is to help them overcome their problems, so you can live in peace and happiness.

When you hate somebody, you think, "Let him be ugly. Let him lie in pain. Let him have no prosperity. Let him not be rich. Let him not be famous. Let him have no friends." However, what actually happens is that your own body generates such harmful chemistry that you experience pain, increased heart rate, tension, change of facial expression, loss of appetite, deprivation of sleep, and you appear very unpleasant to others. You go through the same things you wish on your enemy. Also, you cannot see the truth as it is. Your mind is like boiling water...As long as this condition exists, you cannot meditate well.

Therefore, we recommend very strongly that you practice loving friendliness before you start your serious practice of meditation. Repeat the passages very mindfully and meaningfully. As you recite, these passages, feel true loving friendliness within yourself first and then share it with others...

...these are not magic formulas. ...if you truly participate in these statements and invest them with your own energy, they will serve you well. Give them a try. See for yourself.