

“A MASTERPIECE.”—Jon Kabat-Zinn

# MINDFULNESS IN PLAIN ENGLISH

*Bhante Gunaratana*



THE CLASSIC BESTSELLER

*A Note from the Publisher*

We hope you will enjoy this [Wisdom](#) book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without “digital rights management” (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you'd like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at [wisdompubs.org](http://wisdompubs.org).

MINDFULNESS  
IN PLAIN ENGLISH



# MINDFULNESS IN PLAIN ENGLISH

*Bhante Henepola Gunaratana*



Wisdom Publications • Boston

Wisdom Publications  
199 Elm Street  
Somerville, MA 02214 USA  
[www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org)

© 2011 Bhante Henepola Gunaratana  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system or technologies now known or later developed, without the permission in writing from the publisher.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Gunaratana, Henepola, 1927–

Mindfulness in plain English / Bhante Henepola Gunaratana. — 20th anniversary ed.  
p. cm.

Previous ed.: Boston : Wisdom Publications, 2002.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86171-906-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Vipasyana (Buddhism) 2. Meditation—Buddhism. I. Title.

BQ5630.V5G86 2011

294.3'4435—dc23

2011025555

ISBN 978-0-86171-906-8

eBook 978-0-86171-999-0

15 14 13 12 11

5 4 3 2 1

Cover and interior design by Gopa&Ted2, Inc. Set in Fairfield Light 11/16.

Wisdom Publications' books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in United States of America.



This book was produced with environmental mindfulness. We have elected to print this title on 30% PCW recycled paper. As a result, we have saved the following resources: 73 trees, 32 million BTUs of energy, 7,422 lbs. of greenhouse gases, 33,213 gallons of water, and 2,105 lbs. of solid waste. For more information, please visit our website, [www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org). This paper is also FSC certified. For more information, please visit [www.fscus.org](http://www.fscus.org). Environmental impact estimates were made using the Environmental Paper Network Paper Calculator. For more information visit [www.papercalculator.org](http://www.papercalculator.org).

# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Preface</i>                              | vii |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>                      | ix  |
| 1 Meditation: Why Bother?                   | I   |
| 2 What Meditation Isn't                     | 11  |
| 3 What Meditation Is                        | 23  |
| 4 Attitude                                  | 33  |
| 5 The Practice                              | 39  |
| 6 What to Do with Your Body                 | 57  |
| 7 What to Do with Your Mind                 | 63  |
| 8 Structuring Your Meditation               | 73  |
| 9 Set-up Exercises                          | 81  |
| 10 Dealing with Problems                    | 91  |
| 11 Dealing with Distractions I              | 109 |
| 12 Dealing with Distractions II             | 115 |
| 13 Mindfulness ( <i>Sati</i> )              | 131 |
| 14 Mindfulness versus Concentration         | 143 |
| 15 Meditation in Everyday Life              | 151 |
| 16 What's in It for You                     | 163 |
| Afterword: The Power of Loving Friendliness | 171 |
| Appendix: The Context of the Tradition      | 193 |
| <i>Index</i>                                | 197 |
| <i>About the Author</i>                     | 207 |





## Preface

**I**N MY EXPERIENCE, I have found that the most effective way to express something new in a way people can understand is to use the simplest language possible. I have also learned from teaching that the more rigid the language—which is to say, the less it accounts flexibly for the inevitable variety of people’s experience—the less effective that teaching is. Who would want to meet with stern and rigid language? Especially when learning something new, especially something we may not normally engage with during daily life. That approach can cause meditation, the practice of mindfulness, to appear as something that you cannot always do. This book presents the antidote to that view! At its heart, this is a straightforward book written in ordinary everyday language—yet within these pages, you’ll find rich instructions to begin to discover for yourself the true power of mindfulness in your life, and its many related benefits. I wrote this book in response to the many requests I’d received for just such an introduction. You may find this book an especially useful resource if you are taking up the practice of mindfulness meditation by yourself, without access to a teacher or experienced guide.

In the twenty years since Wisdom Publications first released *Mindfulness in Plain English*, we’ve seen mindfulness influence more and more aspects of modern society and culture—education, psychotherapy, art, yoga, medicine, and the burgeoning science of the brain. And more and more people seek out mindfulness for any

number of reasons—to reduce stress; to improve physical and psychological well-being; to be more effective, skillful, and kind in relationships, at work, and throughout their lives.

And I hope that, whatever reasons have brought you to this book or have brought this book to you, you will find within it clear pointers to an incomparably beneficial path.

*Bhante Gunaratana*



## *Acknowledgments*

IN PREPARING THIS BOOK I have been helped by many of my friends. I am deeply grateful to all of them. I would especially like to express my deepest appreciation and sincere gratitude to John M. Peddicord, Daniel J. Olmsted, Matthew Flickstein, Carol Flickstein, Patrick Hamilton, Genny Hamilton, Bill Mayne, Bhikkhu Dang Pham Jotika, Elizabeth Reid, Bhikkhu Sona, Reverend Sister Sama, and Chris O'Keefe for their most valuable suggestions, comments, criticisms, and support in preparing this book. I would also like to acknowledge the entire team at Wisdom Publications for their help in bringing this book and this new edition out into the world.



## CHAPTER 1

### *Meditation: Why Bother?*

**M**EDITATION IS NOT EASY. It takes time and it takes energy. It also takes grit, determination, and discipline. It requires a host of personal qualities that we normally regard as unpleasant and like to avoid whenever possible. We can sum up all of these qualities in the American word *gumption*. Meditation takes *gumption*. It is certainly a great deal easier just to sit back and watch television. So why bother? Why waste all that time and energy when you could be out enjoying yourself? Why? Simple. Because you are human. Just because of the simple fact that you are human, you find yourself heir to an inherent unsatisfactoriness in life that simply will not go away. You can suppress it from your awareness for a time; you can distract yourself for hours on end, but it always comes back, and usually when you least expect it. All of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, you sit up, take stock, and realize your actual situation in life.

There you are, and you suddenly realize that you are spending your whole life just barely getting by. You keep up a good front. You manage to make ends meet somehow and look okay from the outside. But those periods of desperation, those times when you feel everything caving in on you—you keep those to yourself. You are a mess, and you know it. But you hide it beautifully. Meanwhile, way down under all of that, you just know that there has to be some other way to live, a better way to look at the world, a way to touch life more fully. You

click into it by chance now and then: you get a good job. You fall in love. You win the game. For a while, things are different. Life takes on a richness and clarity that makes all the bad times and humdrum fade away. The whole texture of your experience changes and you say to yourself, “Okay, now I’ve made it; now I will be happy.” But then that fades too, like smoke in the wind. You are left with just a memory—that, and the vague awareness that something is wrong.

You feel that there really is a whole other realm of depth and sensitivity available in life; somehow, you are just not seeing it. You wind up feeling cut off. You feel insulated from the sweetness of experience by some sort of sensory cotton. You are not really touching life. You are not “making it” again. Then even that vague awareness fades away, and you are back to the same old reality. The world looks like the usual foul place. It is an emotional roller coaster, and you spend a lot of your time down at the bottom of the ramp, yearning for the heights.

So what is wrong with you? Are you a freak? No. You are just human. And you suffer from the same malady that infects every human being. It is a monster inside all of us, and it has many arms: chronic tension, lack of genuine compassion for others, including the people closest to you, blocked up feelings and emotional deadness—many, many arms. None of us is entirely free from it. We may deny it. We try to suppress it. We build a whole culture around hiding from it, pretending it is not there, and distracting ourselves with goals, projects, and concerns about status. But it never goes away. It is a constant undercurrent in every thought and every perception, a little voice in the back of the mind that keeps saying, “Not good enough yet. Need to have more. Have to make it better. Have to be better.” It is a monster, a monster that manifests everywhere in subtle forms.

Go to a party. Listen to the laughter, those brittle-tongued voices that express fun on the surface, and fear underneath. Feel the ten-

sion, the pressure. Nobody really relaxes. They are faking it. Go to a ball game. Watch the fans in the stand. Watch the irrational fits of anger. Watch the uncontrolled frustration bubbling forth from people that masquerades under the guise of enthusiasm or team spirit. Booing, catcalls, and unbridled egotism in the name of team loyalty, drunkenness, fights in the stands—these are people trying desperately to release tension from within; these are not people who are at peace with themselves. Watch the news on TV. Listen to the lyrics of popular songs. You find the same theme repeated over and over in variations: jealousy, suffering, discontent, and stress.

Life seems to be a perpetual struggle, an enormous effort against staggering odds. And what is our solution to all this dissatisfaction? We get stuck in the “if only” syndrome. If only I had more money, then I would be happy. If only I could find somebody who really loved me; if only I could lose twenty pounds; if only I had a color TV, a hot tub, and curly hair; and on and on forever. Where does all this junk come from, and more important, what can we do about it? It comes from the conditions of our own minds. It is a deep, subtle, and pervasive set of mental habits, a Gordian knot that we have tied bit by bit and that we can only unravel in just that same way, one piece at a time. We can tune up our awareness, dredge up each separate piece, and bring it out into the light. We can make the unconscious conscious, slowly, one piece at a time.

The essence of our experience is change. Change is incessant. Moment by moment life flows by, and it is never the same. Perpetual fluctuation is the essence of the perceptual universe. A thought springs up in your head and half a second later, it is gone. In comes another one, and then that is gone too. A sound strikes your ears, and then silence. Open your eyes and the world pours in, blink and it is gone. People come into your life and go. Friends leave, relatives die. Your fortunes go up, and they go down. Sometimes you win, and just

as often, you lose. It is incessant: change, change, change; no two moments ever the same.

There is not a thing wrong with this. It is the nature of the universe. But human culture has taught us some odd responses to this endless flowing. We categorize experiences. We try to stick each perception, every mental change in this endless flow, into one of three mental pigeon holes: it is good, bad, or neutral. Then, according to which box we stick it in, we perceive with a set of fixed habitual mental responses. If a particular perception has been labeled “good,” then we try to freeze time right there. We grab onto that particular thought, fondle it, hold it, and we try to keep it from escaping. When that does not work, we go all-out in an effort to repeat the experience that caused the thought. Let us call this mental habit “grasping.”

Over on the other side of the mind lies the box labeled “bad.” When we perceive something “bad,” we try to push it away. We try to deny it, reject it, and get rid of it any way we can. We fight against our own experience. We run from pieces of ourselves. Let us call this mental habit “rejecting.” Between these two reactions lies the “neutral” box. Here we place the experiences that are neither good nor bad. They are tepid, neutral, uninteresting. We pack experience away in the neutral box so that we can ignore it and thus return our attention to where the action is, namely, our endless round of desire and aversion. So this “neutral” category of experience gets robbed of its fair share of our attention. Let us call this mental habit “ignoring.” The direct result of all this lunacy is a perpetual treadmill race to nowhere, endlessly pounding after pleasure, endlessly fleeing from pain, and endlessly ignoring 90 percent of our experience. Then we wonder why life tastes so flat. In the final analysis this system does not work.

No matter how hard you pursue pleasure and success, there are times when you fail. No matter how fast you flee, there are times when pain catches up with you. And in between those times, life is



so boring you could scream. Our minds are full of opinions and criticisms. We have built walls all around ourselves and are trapped in the prison of our own likes and dislikes. We suffer.

“Suffering” is a big word in Buddhist thought. It is a key term and should be thoroughly understood. The Pali word is *dukkha*, and it does not just mean the agony of the body. It means that deep, subtle sense of dissatisfaction that is a part of every mind moment and that results directly from the mental treadmill. The essence of life is suffering, said the Buddha. At first glance this statement seems exceedingly morbid and pessimistic. It even seems untrue. After all, there are plenty of times when we are happy. Aren’t there? No, there are not. It just seems that way. Take any moment when you feel really fulfilled and examine it closely. Down under the joy, you will find that subtle, all-pervasive undercurrent of tension that no matter how great this moment is, it is going to end. No matter how much you just gained, you are inevitably either going to lose some of it or spend the rest of your days guarding what you have and scheming how to get more. And in the end, you are going to die; in the end, you lose everything. It is all transitory.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn’t it? Luckily, it’s not—not at all. It only sounds bleak when you view it from the ordinary mental perspective, the very perspective at which the treadmill mechanism operates. Underneath lies another perspective, a completely different way to look at the universe. It is a level of functioning in which the mind does not try to freeze time, does not grasp onto our experience as it flows by, and does not try to block things out and ignore them. It is a level of experience beyond good and bad, beyond pleasure and pain. It is a lovely way to perceive the world, and it is a learnable skill. It is not easy, but it can be learned.

Happiness and peace are really the prime issues in human existence. That is what all of us are seeking. This is often a bit hard to

see because we cover up those basic goals with layers of surface objectives. We want food, wealth, sex, entertainment, and respect. We even say to ourselves that the idea of “happiness” is too abstract: “Look, I am practical. Just give me enough money and I will buy all the happiness I need.” Unfortunately, this is an attitude that does not work. Examine each of these goals and you will find that they are superficial. You want food. Why? Because I am hungry. So you are hungry—so what? Well, if I eat, I won’t be hungry, and then I’ll feel good. Ah ha! “Feel good”: now there is the real item. What we really seek is not the surface goals; those are just means to an end. What we are really after is the feeling of relief that comes when the drive is satisfied. Relief, relaxation, and an end to the tension. Peace, happiness—no more yearning.

So what is this happiness? For most of us, the idea of perfect happiness would be to have everything we wanted and be in control of everything, playing Caesar, making the whole world dance a jig according to our every whim. Once again, it does not work that way. Take a look at the people in history who have actually held this type of power. They were not happy people. Certainly, they were not at peace with themselves. Why not? Because they were driven to control the world totally and absolutely, and they could not. They wanted to control all people, yet there remained people who refused to be controlled. These powerful people could not control the stars. They still got sick. They still had to die.

You can’t ever get everything you want. It is impossible. Luckily, there is another option. You can learn to control your mind, to step outside of the endless cycle of desire and aversion. You can learn not to want what you want, to recognize desires but not be controlled by them. This does not mean that you lie down on the road and invite everybody to walk all over you. It means that you continue to live a very normal-looking life, but live from a whole new viewpoint. You do

the things that a person must do, but you are free from that obsessive, compulsive drivenness of your own desires. You want something, but you don't need to chase after it. You fear something, but you don't need to stand there quaking in your boots. This sort of mental cultivation is very difficult. It takes years. But trying to control everything is impossible; the difficult is preferable to the impossible.

Wait a minute, though. Peace and happiness! Isn't that what civilization is all about? We build skyscrapers and freeways. We have paid vacations, TV sets; we provide free hospitals and sick leaves, Social Security and welfare benefits. All of that is aimed at providing some measure of peace and happiness. Yet the rate of mental illness climbs steadily, and the crime rates rise faster. The streets are crawling with aggressive and unstable individuals. Stick your arms outside the safety of your own door, and somebody is very likely to steal your watch! Something is not working. A happy person does not steal. One who is at peace with him- or herself does not feel driven to kill. We like to think that our society is employing every area of human knowledge in order to achieve peace and happiness, but this is not true.

We are just beginning to realize that we have overdeveloped the material aspects of existence at the expense of the deeper emotional and spiritual aspects, and we are paying the price for that error. It is one thing to talk about degeneration of moral and spiritual fiber in America today, and another thing to actually do something about it. The place to start is within ourselves. Look carefully inside, truthfully and objectively, and each of us will see moments when "I am the delinquent" and "I am the crazy person." We will learn to see those moments, see them clearly, cleanly, and without condemnation, and we will be on our way up and out of being so.

You can't make radical changes in the pattern of your life until you begin to see yourself exactly as you are now. As soon as you do that,

changes will flow naturally. You don't have to force anything, struggle, or obey rules dictated to you by some authority. It is automatic; you just change. But arriving at that initial insight is quite a task. You have to see who you are and how you are without illusion, judgment, or resistance of any kind. You have to see your place in society and your function as a social being. You have to see your duties and obligations to your fellow human beings, and above all, your responsibility to yourself as an individual living with other individuals. And finally, you have to see all of that clearly as a single unit, an irreducible whole of interrelationship. It sounds complex, but it can occur in a single instant. Mental cultivation through meditation is without rival in helping you achieve this sort of understanding and serene happiness.

The *Dhammapada*, an ancient Buddhist text (which anticipated Freud by thousands of years), says: "What you are now is the result of what you were. What you will be tomorrow will be the result of what you are now. The consequences of an evil mind will follow you like the cart follows the ox that pulls it. The consequences of a purified mind will follow you like your own shadow. No one can do more for you than your own purified mind—no parent, no relative, no friend, no one. A well-disciplined mind brings happiness."

Meditation is intended to purify the mind. It cleanses the thought process of what can be called psychic irritants, things like greed, hatred, and jealousy, which keep you snarled up in emotional bondage. Meditation brings the mind to a state of tranquillity and awareness, a state of concentration and insight.

In our society, we are great believers in education. We believe that knowledge makes a person civilized. Civilization, however, polishes a person only superficially. Subject our noble and sophisticated gentleperson to the stresses of war or economic collapse, and see what happens. It is one thing to obey the law because you know the penal-

ties and fear the consequences; it is something else entirely to obey the law because you have cleansed yourself from the greed that would make you steal and the hatred that would make you kill. Throw a stone into a stream. The running water would smooth the stone's surface, but the inside remains unchanged. Take that same stone and place it in the intense fires of a forge, and it all melts; the whole stone changes inside and out. Civilization changes a person on the outside. Meditation softens a person from within, through and through.

Meditation is called the Great Teacher. It is the cleansing crucible fire that works slowly but surely, through understanding. The greater your understanding, the more flexible and tolerant, the more compassionate you can be. You become like a perfect parent or an ideal teacher. You are ready to forgive and forget. You feel love toward others because you understand them, and you understand others because you have understood yourself. You have looked deeply inside and seen self-illusion and your own human failings, seen your own humanity and learned to forgive and to love. When you have learned compassion for yourself, compassion for others is automatic. An accomplished meditator has achieved a profound understanding of life, and he or she inevitably relates to the world with a deep and uncritical love.

Meditation is a lot like cultivating a new land. To make a field out of a forest, first you have to clear the trees and pull out the stumps. Then you till the soil and fertilize it, sow your seed, and harvest your crops. To cultivate your mind, first you have to clear out the various irritants that are in the way—pull them right out by the root so that they won't grow back. Then you fertilize: you pump energy and discipline into the mental soil. Then you sow the seed, and harvest your crops of faith, morality, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Faith and morality, by the way, have a special meaning in this

context. Buddhism does not advocate faith in the sense of believing something because it is written in a book, attributed to a prophet, or taught to you by some authority figure. The meaning of faith here is closer to confidence. It is knowing that something is true because you have seen it work, because you have observed that very thing within yourself. In the same way, morality is not a ritualistic obedience to a code of behavior imposed by an external authority. It is rather a healthy habit pattern that you have consciously and voluntarily chosen to impose upon yourself because you recognize its superiority to your present behavior.

The purpose of meditation is personal transformation. The “you” that goes in one side of the meditation experience is not the same “you” that comes out the other side. Meditation changes your character by a process of sensitization, by making you deeply aware of your own thoughts, words, and deeds. Your arrogance evaporates, and your antagonism dries up. Your mind becomes still and calm. And your life smoothes out. Thus meditation, properly performed, prepares you to meet the ups and downs of existence. It reduces your tension, fear, and worry. Restlessness recedes and passion moderates. Things begin to fall into place, and your life becomes a glide instead of a struggle. All of this happens through understanding.

Meditation sharpens your concentration and your thinking power. Then, piece by piece, your own subconscious motives and mechanics become clear to you. Your intuition sharpens. The precision of your thought increases, and gradually you come to a direct knowledge of things as they really are, without prejudice and without illusion.

So are these reasons enough to bother? Scarcely. These are just promises on paper. There is only one way you will ever know if meditation is worth the effort: learn to do it right, and do it. See for yourself.

## CHAPTER 2

### *What Meditation Isn't*

**M**EDITATION IS A WORD. You have heard this word before, or you would never have picked up this book. The thinking process operates by association, and all sorts of ideas are associated with the word “meditation.” Some of them are probably accurate, and others are hogwash. Some of them pertain more properly to other systems of meditation and have nothing to do with vipassana practice. Before we proceed, it behooves us to blast some of that residue out of our neuron circuits so that new information can pass unimpeded. Let us start with some of the most obvious stuff.

We are not going to teach you to contemplate your navel or to chant secret syllables. You are not conquering demons or harnessing invisible energies. There are no colored belts given for your performance, and you don't have to shave your head or wear a turban. You don't even have to give away all your belongings and move to a monastery. In fact, unless your life is immoral and chaotic, you can probably get started right away and make some progress. Sounds fairly encouraging, wouldn't you say?

There are many books on the subject of meditation. Most of them are written from a point of view that lies squarely within one particular religious or philosophical tradition, and many of the authors have not bothered to point this out. They make statements about meditation that sound like general laws but are actually highly

specific procedures exclusive to that particular system of practice. Worse yet is the panoply of complex theories and interpretations available, often at odds with one another. The result is a real mess: an enormous jumble of conflicting opinions accompanied by a mass of extraneous data. This book is specific. We are dealing exclusively with the vipassana system of meditation. We are going to teach you to watch the functioning of your own mind in a calm and detached manner so you can gain insight into your own behavior. The goal is awareness, an awareness so intense, concentrated, and finely tuned that you will be able to pierce the inner workings of reality itself.

There are a number of common misconceptions about meditation. We see the same questions crop up again and again from new students. It is best to deal with these things at once, because they are the sort of preconceptions that can block your progress right from the outset. We are going to take these misconceptions one at a time and dissolve them.

### **MISCONCEPTION 1: MEDITATION IS JUST A RELAXATION TECHNIQUE.**

The bugaboo here is the word *just*. Relaxation is a key component of meditation, but vipassana-style meditation aims at a much loftier goal. The statement is essentially true for many other systems of meditation. All meditation procedures stress concentration of the mind, bringing the mind to rest on one item or one area of thought. Do it strongly and thoroughly enough, and you achieve a deep and blissful relaxation, called *jhana*. It is a state of such supreme tranquillity that it amounts to rapture, a form of pleasure that lies above and beyond anything that can be experienced in the normal state of consciousness. Most systems stop right there. *Jhana* is the goal, and when you attain that, you simply repeat the experience for the rest of your life. Not so



with vipassana meditation. Vipassana seeks another goal: awareness. Concentration and relaxation are considered necessary concomitants to awareness. They are required precursors, handy tools, and beneficial byproducts. But they are not the goal. The goal is insight. Vipassana meditation is a profound religious practice aimed at nothing less than the purification and transformation of your everyday life. We will deal more thoroughly with the differences between concentration and insight in chapter 14.

### **MISCONCEPTION 2: MEDITATION MEANS GOING INTO A TRANCE.**

Here again the statement could be applied accurately to certain systems of meditation, but not to vipassana. Insight meditation is not a form of hypnosis. You are not trying to black out your mind so as to become unconscious, or trying to turn yourself into an emotionless vegetable. If anything, the reverse is true: you will become more and more attuned to your own emotional changes. You will learn to know yourself with ever greater clarity and precision. In learning this technique, certain states do occur that may appear trancelike to the observer. But they are really quite the opposite. In hypnotic trance, the subject is susceptible to control by another party, whereas in deep concentration, the meditator remains very much under his or her own control. The similarity is superficial, and in any case, the occurrence of these phenomena is not the point of vipassana. As we have said, the deep concentration of *jhana* is simply a tool or stepping stone on the route to heightened awareness. Vipassana, by definition, is the cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. If you find that you are becoming unconscious in meditation, then you aren't meditating, according to the definition of that word as used in the vipassana system.

**MISCONCEPTION 3: MEDITATION IS A MYSTERIOUS PRACTICE THAT CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD.**

Here again, this is almost true, but not quite. Meditation deals with levels of consciousness that lie deeper than conceptual thought. Therefore, some of the experiences of meditation just won't fit into words. That does not mean, however, that meditation cannot be understood. There are deeper ways to understand things than by the use of words. You understand how to walk. You probably can't describe the exact order in which your nerve fibers and your muscles contract during that process. But you know how to do it. Meditation needs to be understood that same way—by doing it. It is not something that you can learn in abstract terms, or something to be talked about. It is something to be experienced. Meditation is not a mindless formula that gives automatic and predictable results; you can never really predict exactly what will come up during any particular session. It is an investigation and an experiment, an adventure every time. In fact, this is so true that when you do reach a feeling of predictability and sameness in your practice, you can read that as an indication that you have gotten off track and are headed for stagnation. Learning to look at each second as if it were the first and only second in the universe is essential in vipassana meditation.

**MISCONCEPTION 4: THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION IS TO BECOME PSYCHIC.**

No. The purpose of meditation is to develop awareness. Learning to read minds is not the point. Levitation is not the goal. The goal is liberation. There is a link between psychic phenomena and meditation, but the relationship is complex. During early stages of the meditator's career, such phenomena may or may not arise. Some people may

experience some intuitive understanding or memories from past lives; others do not. In any case, these phenomena are not regarded as well-developed and reliable psychic abilities, and they should not be given undue importance. Such phenomena are in fact fairly dangerous to new meditators in that they are quite seductive. They can be an ego trap, luring you right off the track. Your best approach is not to place any emphasis on these phenomena. If they come up, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine, too. There is a point in the meditator's career where he or she may practice special exercises to develop psychic powers. But this occurs far down the line. Only after the meditator has reached a very deep stage of *jhana* will he or she be advanced enough to work with such powers without the danger of their running out of control or taking over his or her life. The meditator will then develop them strictly for the purpose of service to others. In most cases, this state of affairs occurs only after decades of practice. Don't worry about it. Just concentrate on developing more and more awareness. If voices and visions pop up, just notice them and let them go. Don't get involved.

**MISCONCEPTION 5: MEDITATION IS DANGEROUS,  
AND A PRUDENT PERSON SHOULD AVOID IT.**

Everything is dangerous. Walk across the street and you may get hit by a bus. Take a shower and you could break your neck. Meditate, and you will probably dredge up various nasty matters from your past. The suppressed material that has been buried for quite some time can be scary. But exploring it is also highly profitable. No activity is entirely without risk, but that does not mean that we should wrap ourselves in a protective cocoon. That is not living, but is premature death. The way to deal with danger is to know approximately how much of it there is, where it is likely to be found, and how to deal

with it when it arises. That is the purpose of this manual. Vipassana is development of awareness. That in itself is not dangerous; on the contrary, increased awareness is a safeguard against danger. Properly done, meditation is a very gentle and gradual process. Take it slow and easy, and the development of your practice will occur very naturally. Nothing should be forced. Later, when you are under the close scrutiny and protective wisdom of a competent teacher, you can accelerate your rate of growth by taking a period of intensive meditation. In the beginning, though, easy does it. Work gently and everything will be fine.

#### **MISCONCEPTION 6: MEDITATION IS FOR SAINTS AND SADHUS, NOT FOR REGULAR PEOPLE.**

This attitude is very prevalent in Asia, where monks and holy men are accorded an enormous amount of ritualized reverence, somewhat akin to the American attitude of idolizing movie stars and baseball heroes. Such people are stereotyped, made larger than life, and saddled with all sorts of characteristics that few human beings can ever live up to. Even in the West, we share some of this attitude about meditation. We expect the meditator to be an extraordinarily pious figure in whose mouth butter would never dare to melt. A little personal contact with such people will quickly dispel this illusion. They usually prove to be people of enormous energy and gusto, who live their lives with amazing vigor.

It is true, of course, that most holy men meditate, but they don't meditate because they are holy men. That is backward. They are holy men *because* they meditate; meditation is how they got there. And they started meditating before they became holy, otherwise they would not be holy. This is an important point. A sizable number of students seems to feel that a person should be completely moral

before beginning to meditate. It is an unworkable strategy. Morality requires a certain degree of mental control as a prerequisite. You can't follow any set of moral precepts without at least a little self-control, and if your mind is perpetually spinning like a fruit cylinder in a slot machine, self-control is highly unlikely. So mental culture has to come first.

There are three integral factors in Buddhist meditation—morality, concentration, and wisdom. These three factors grow together as your practice deepens. Each one influences the other, so you cultivate the three of them at once, not separately. When you have the wisdom to truly understand a situation, compassion toward all parties involved is automatic, and compassion means that you automatically restrain yourself from any thought, word, or deed that might harm yourself or others; thus, your behavior is automatically moral. It is only when you don't understand things deeply that you create problems. If you fail to see the consequences of your actions, you will blunder. The person who waits to become totally moral before he begins to meditate is waiting for a situation that will never arise. The ancient sages say this person is like a man waiting for the ocean to become calm so that he can take a bath.

To understand this relationship more fully, let us propose that there are levels of morality. The lowest level is adherence to a set of rules and regulations laid down by somebody else. It could be your favorite prophet. It could be the state, the head of your tribe, or a parent. No matter who generates the rules, all you have to do at this level is know the rules and follow them. A robot can do that. Even a trained chimpanzee could do it, if the rules were simple enough and he were smacked with a stick every time he broke one. This level requires no meditation at all. All you need are the rules and somebody to swing the stick.

The next level of morality consists of obeying the same rules even

in the absence of somebody who will smack you. You obey because you have internalized the rules. You smack yourself every time you break one. This level requires a bit of mind control. But if your thought pattern is chaotic, your behavior will be chaotic, too. Mental cultivation reduces mental chaos.

There is a third level of morality, which might better be termed as “ethics.” This level is a quantum leap up the scale from the first two levels, a complete shift in orientation. At the level of ethics, a person does not follow hard and fast rules dictated by authority. A person chooses to follow a path dictated by mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion. This level requires real intelligence, and an ability to juggle all the factors in every situation to arrive at a unique, creative, and appropriate response each time. Furthermore, the individual making these decisions needs to have dug him- or herself out of a limited personal viewpoint. The person has to see the entire situation from an objective point of view, giving equal weight to his or her own needs and those of others. In other words, he or she has to be free from greed, hatred, envy, and all the other selfish junk that ordinarily keeps us from seeing the other person’s side of the issue. Only then can he or she choose the precise set of actions that will be truly optimal for that situation. This level of morality absolutely demands meditation, unless you were born a saint. There is no other way to acquire the skill. Furthermore, the sorting process required at this level is exhausting. If you tried to juggle all those factors in every situation with your conscious mind, you’d overload yourself. The intellect just can’t keep that many balls in the air at once. Luckily, a deeper level of consciousness can do this sort of processing with ease. Meditation can accomplish the sorting process for you. It is an eerie feeling.

One day you’ve got a problem—let’s say, to handle Uncle Herman’s latest divorce. It looks absolutely unsolvable, an enormous muddle

of “maybes” that would give King Solomon himself a headache. The next day you are washing the dishes, thinking about something else entirely, and suddenly the solution is there. It just pops out of the deep mind, and you say, “Ah ha!” and the whole thing is solved. This sort of intuition can only occur when you disengage the logic circuits from the problem and give the deep mind the opportunity to cook up the solution. The conscious mind just gets in the way. Meditation teaches you how to disentangle yourself from the thought process. It is the mental art of stepping out of your own way, and that’s a pretty useful skill in everyday life. Meditation is certainly not an irrelevant practice strictly for ascetics and hermits. It is a practical skill that focuses on everyday events and has immediate applications in everybody’s life. Meditation is not “other-worldly.”

Unfortunately, this very fact constitutes the drawback for certain students. They enter the practice expecting instantaneous cosmic revelation, complete with angelic choirs. What they usually get is a more efficient way to take out the trash and better ways to deal with Uncle Herman. They are needlessly disappointed. The trash solution comes first. The voices of archangels take a bit longer.

### **MISCONCEPTION 7: MEDITATION IS RUNNING AWAY FROM REALITY.**

Incorrect. Meditation is running straight into reality. It does not insulate you from the pain of life but rather allows you to delve so deeply into life and all its aspects that you pierce the pain barrier and go beyond suffering. Vipassana is a practice done with the specific intention of facing reality, to fully experience life just as it is and to cope with exactly what you find. It allows you to blow aside the illusions and free yourself from all the polite little lies you tell yourself all the time. What is there is there. You are who you are, and lying to

yourself about your own weaknesses and motivations only binds you tighter to them. Vipassana meditation is not an attempt to forget yourself or to cover up your troubles. It is learning to look at yourself exactly as you are to see what is there and accept it fully. Only then can you change it.

### **MISCONCEPTION 8: MEDITATION IS A GREAT WAY TO GET HIGH.**

Well, yes and no. Meditation does produce lovely blissful feelings sometimes. But they are not the purpose, and they don't always occur. Furthermore, if you do meditation with that purpose in mind, they are less likely to occur than if you just meditate for the actual purpose of meditation, which is increased awareness. Bliss results from relaxation, and relaxation results from release of tension. Seeking bliss from meditation introduces tension into the process, which blows the whole chain of events. It is a Catch-22: you can only experience bliss if you don't chase after it. Euphoria is not the purpose of meditation. It will often arise, but should be regarded as a byproduct. Still, it is a very pleasant side effect, and it becomes more and more frequent the longer you meditate. You won't hear any disagreement about this from advanced practitioners.

### **MISCONCEPTION 9: MEDITATION IS SELFISH.**

It certainly looks that way. There sits the meditator parked on a little cushion. Is she out donating blood? No. Is she busy working with disaster victims? No. But let us examine her motivation. Why is she doing this? The meditator's intention is to purge her own mind of anger, prejudice, and ill will, and she is actively engaged in the process of getting rid of greed, tension, and insensitivity. Those are



the very items that obstruct her compassion for others. Until they are gone, any good works that she does are likely to be just an extension of her own ego, and of no real help in the long run. Harm in the name of help is one of the oldest games. The grand inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition spouted the loftiest of motives. The Salem witchcraft trials were conducted for the “public good.” Examine the personal lives of advanced meditators, and you will often find them engaged in humanitarian service. You will seldom find them as crusading missionaries who are willing to sacrifice certain individuals for the sake of a supposedly pious idea. The fact is that we are more selfish than we know. The ego has a way of turning the loftiest activities into trash if it is allowed free range. Through meditation, we become aware of ourselves exactly as we are, by waking up to the numerous subtle ways that we act out our own selfishness. Then we truly begin to be genuinely selfless. Cleansing yourself of selfishness is not a selfish activity.

**MISCONCEPTION 10: WHEN YOU MEDITATE,  
YOU SIT AROUND THINKING LOFTY THOUGHTS.**

Wrong again. There are certain systems of contemplation in which this sort of thing is done. But that is not vipassana. Vipassana is the practice of awareness, awareness of whatever is there, be it supreme truth or trivial trash. What is there, is there. Of course, lofty thoughts may arise during your practice. They are certainly not to be avoided. Neither are they to be sought. They are just pleasant side effects. Vipassana is a simple practice. It consists of experiencing your own life events directly, without preferences and without mental images pasted onto them. Vipassana is seeing your life unfold from moment to moment without biases. What comes up, comes up. It is very simple.

**MISCONCEPTION 11: A COUPLE OF WEEKS OF MEDITATION AND ALL MY PROBLEMS WILL GO AWAY.**

Sorry, meditation is not a quick cure-all. You will start seeing changes right away, but really profound effects are years down the line. That is just the way the universe is constructed. Nothing worthwhile is achieved overnight. Meditation is tough in some respects, requiring a long discipline and a sometimes painful process of practice. At each sitting you gain some results, but they are often very subtle. They occur deep within the mind, and only manifest much later. And if you are sitting there constantly looking for huge, instantaneous changes, you will miss the subtle shifts altogether. You will get discouraged, give up, and swear that no such changes could ever occur. Patience is the key. Patience. If you learn nothing else from meditation, you will learn patience. Patience is essential for any profound change.

## CHAPTER 3

### *What Meditation Is*

MEDITATION IS A WORD, and words are used in different ways by different speakers. This may seem like a trivial point, but it is not. It is quite important to distinguish exactly what a particular speaker means by the words he or she uses. Probably every culture on earth has produced some sort of mental practice that could be termed meditation. It all depends on how loose a definition you give to that word. The techniques worldwide are enormously varied, but we will make no attempt to survey them. There are other books for that. For the purpose of this volume, we will restrict our discussion to those practices best known to Western audiences and most often associated with the term meditation.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition we find two 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. From the standpoint of mental cultivation, both of these activities are exercises in concentration. The normal deluge of conscious thought is restricted, and the mind is brought to one conscious area of operation. The results are those you find in any concentrative practice: deep calm, a physiological slowing of the metabolism, and a sense of peace and well-being.

Out of the Hindu tradition comes yogic meditation, which is also

purely concentrative. The traditional basic exercises consist of focusing the mind on a single object—a stone, a candle flame, a syllable, or whatever—and not allowing it to wander. Having acquired the basic skill, the yogi proceeds to expand his practice by taking on more complex objects of meditation—chants, colorful religious images, energy channels in the body, and so forth. Still, no matter how complex the object of meditation, the meditation itself remains purely an exercise in concentration.

Within the Buddhist tradition, concentration is also highly valued. But a new element is added and more highly stressed: the element of awareness. All Buddhist meditation aims at the development of awareness, using concentration as a tool toward that end. The Buddhist tradition is very wide, however, and there are several diverse routes to this goal. Zen meditation uses two separate tacks. The first is the direct plunge into awareness by sheer force of will. You sit down and you just sit, meaning that you toss out of your mind everything except pure awareness of sitting. This sounds very simple. It is not. (A brief trial will demonstrate just how difficult it really is.) The second Zen approach, used in the Rinzai school, is that of tricking the mind out of conscious thought and into pure awareness. This is done by giving a student an unsolvable riddle, which he must solve nonetheless, and by placing him in a horrendous training situation. Since he cannot escape from the pain of the situation, he must flee into a pure experience of the moment: there is nowhere else to go. Zen is tough. It is effective for many people, but it is really tough.

Another stratagem, tantric Buddhism, is nearly the reverse. Conscious thought, at least the way we usually do it, is the manifestation of ego, the “you” that you usually think that you are. Conscious thought is tightly connected with self-concept. The self-concept or ego is nothing more than a set of reactions and mental images that are artificially pasted to the flowing process of pure awareness.

Tantra seeks to obtain pure awareness by destroying this ego image. This is accomplished by a process of visualization. The student is given a particular religious image to meditate upon, for example, one of the deities from the tantric pantheon. She does this in so thorough a fashion that she becomes that entity. She takes off her own identity and puts on another. This takes a while, as you might imagine, but it works. During the process, she is able to watch the way in which the ego is constructed and put in place. She comes to recognize the arbitrary nature of all egos, including her own, and she escapes from bondage to the ego. She is left in a state where she may have an ego if she so chooses—either her own or whichever other she might wish—or she can do without one. Result: pure awareness. Tantra is not exactly a piece of cake either.

Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. One's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of one's own existence. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of the flow of life experience. Vipassana is a gentle technique, but it also is very, very thorough. It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to the purpose of becoming more and more aware of your own life experience. 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 truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena. We think we are doing this already, but that is an illusion. It comes

from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experiences that we might just as well be asleep. We are simply not paying enough attention to notice that we are not paying attention. It is another Catch-22.

Through the process of mindfulness, we slowly become aware of what we really are, down below the ego image. We wake up to what life really is. It is not just a parade of ups and downs, lollipops and smacks on the wrist. That is an illusion. Life has a much deeper texture than that if we bother to look, and if we look in the right way.

Vipassana is a form of mental training that will teach you to experience the world in an entirely new way. You will learn for the first time what is truly happening to you, around you, and within you. It is a process of self-discovery, a participatory investigation in which you observe your own experiences while participating in them. The practice must be approached with this attitude: “Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudices and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don’t want to just accept somebody else’s explanation. I want to see it for myself.”

If you pursue your meditation practice with this attitude, you will succeed. You’ll find yourself observing things objectively, exactly as they are—flowing and changing from moment to moment. Life then takes on an unbelievable richness that cannot be described. It has to be experienced.

The Pali term for insight meditation is *vipassana bhavana*. *Bhavana* comes from the root *bhu*, which means to grow or to become. Therefore *bhavana* means to cultivate, and the word is always used in reference to the mind; *bhavana* means mental cultivation. *Vipassana* is derived from two roots. *Passana* means seeing or perceiving. *Vi* is a prefix with a complex set of connotations that can be roughly

translated as “in a special way,” and also *into* and *through* “a special way.” The whole meaning of the word *vipassana* is looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing. This process leads to insight into the basic reality of whatever is being examined. Put these words together and *vipassana bhavana* means the cultivation of the mind toward the aim of seeing in the special way that leads to insight and full understanding.

In vipassana meditation we cultivate this special way of seeing life. We train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is, and we call this special mode of perception *mindfulness*. This process of mindfulness is really quite different from what we usually do. We usually do not look into what is actually there in front of us. We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those mental objects for reality. We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness. We spend all of our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears, endlessly seeking security. Meanwhile, the world of real experience flows by untouched and untasted. In vipassana meditation we train ourselves to ignore the constant impulses to be more comfortable, and we dive into reality instead. The irony of it is that real peace comes only when you stop chasing it—another Catch-22.

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 reality without illusion, complete with all its pain and danger, real freedom and security will be yours. This is not a doctrine we are trying to drill into you; it is an observable reality, something you can and should see for yourself.

Buddhism is 2,500 years old, and any thought system of such vintage has time to develop layers and layers of doctrine and ritual. Nevertheless, the fundamental attitude of Buddhism is intensely empirical and antiauthoritarian. Gotama the Buddha was a highly unorthodox individual and a real antitraditionalist. He did not offer his teaching as a set of dogmas, but rather as a set of propositions for each individual to investigate for him- or herself. His invitation to one and all was, "Come and see." One of the things he said to his followers was, "Place no head above your own." By this he meant, don't just accept somebody else's word. See for yourself.

We want you to apply this attitude to every word you read in this manual. We are not making statements that you should accept merely because we are authorities in the field. Blind faith has nothing to do with this. These are experiential realities. Learn to adjust your mode of perception according to instructions given in the book, and you will see for yourself. That, and only that, will provide grounds for your faith. Essentially, insight meditation is a practice of investigative personal discovery.

Having said this, we will present here a very short synopsis of some of the key points of Buddhist philosophy. We make no attempt to be thorough, since that has been quite nicely done in many other books. But since this material is essential to understanding vipassana, some mention must be made.

From the Buddhist point of view, we human beings live in a very peculiar fashion. We view impermanent things as permanent, though everything is changing all around us. The process of change is constant and eternal. Even as you read these words, your body is aging. But you pay no attention to that. The book in your hand is decaying. The print is fading, and the pages are becoming brittle. The walls around you are aging. The molecules within those walls are vibrating at an enormous rate, and everything is shifting, going to pieces,



and slowly dissolving. You pay no attention to that either. Then one day you look around you. Your skin is wrinkled and your joints ache. The book is a yellowed, faded thing; and the building is falling apart. So you pine for lost youth, cry when your possessions are gone. Where does this pain come from? It comes from your own inattention. You failed to look closely at life. You failed to observe the constantly shifting flow of the world as it passed by. You set up a collection of mental constructions—“me,” “the book,” “the building”—and you assumed that those were solid, real entities. You assumed that they would endure forever. They never do. But now you can tune into the constant change. You can learn to perceive your life as an ever-flowing movement. You can learn to see the continuous flow of all conditioned things. You can. It is just a matter of time and training.

Our human perceptual habits are remarkably stupid in some ways. We tune out 99 percent 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.

An example: There you are, sitting alone in the stillness of a peaceful night. A dog barks in the distance, which, in itself, is neither good nor bad. Up out of that sea of silence come surging waves of sonic vibration. You start to hear the lovely complex patterns, and they are turned into scintillating electronic stimulations within the nervous system. The process should be used as an experience of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. We humans tend to ignore it totally. Instead, we solidify that perception into a mental object. We paste a mental picture on it and launch into a series of emotional and conceptual reactions to it. “There is that dog again. He is always barking at night. What a nuisance. Every night he is a real bother. Somebody should do something. Maybe I should call a cop. No, a dog catcher—I’ll call the pound. No, maybe I’ll just write a

nasty letter to the guy who owns that dog. No, too much trouble. I'll just get ear plugs." These are just perceptual mental habits. You learn to respond this way as a child by copying the perceptual habits of those around you. These perceptual responses are not inherent in the structure of the nervous system. The circuits are there, but this is not the only way that our mental machinery can be used. That which has been learned can be unlearned. The first step is to realize what you are doing as you are doing it, to stand back and quietly watch.

From the Buddhist perspective, we humans have a backward view of life. We look at what is actually the cause of suffering and see it as happiness. The cause of suffering is that desire-aversion syndrome that we spoke of earlier. Up pops a perception. It could be anything—an attractive woman, a handsome guy, a speedboat, the aroma of baking bread, a truck tailgating you, anything. Whatever it is, the very next thing we do is to react to the stimulus with a feeling about it.

For example, take worry. We worry a lot. Worry itself is the problem. Worry is a process; it has steps. Anxiety is not just a state of existence but a procedure. What you've got to do is to look at the very beginning of that procedure, those initial stages before the process has built up a head of steam. The very 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. Luckily, there is a handy little tool called vipassana meditation that you can use to short-circuit the whole mechanism.

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 calmness and clarity. We begin to see ourselves reacting without getting caught up in the reactions themselves. The obsessive nature of thought slowly

dies. We can still get married. We can still get out of the path of the truck. But we don't need to go through hell over either one.

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. Because of these advantages, Buddhism views this way of looking at things as a correct view of life; Buddhist texts call it seeing things as they really are.

Vipassana meditation is a set of training procedures that gradually open us to this new view of reality as it truly is. Along with this new reality goes a new view of that most central aspect of reality: "me." A close inspection reveals that we have done the same thing to "me" that we have done to all other perceptions. We have taken a flowing vortex of thought, feeling, and sensation and solidified that into a mental construct. Then we have stuck a label onto it: "me." Forever after, we treat it as if it were a static and enduring entity. We view it as a thing separate from all other things. We pinch ourselves off from the rest of that process of eternal change that is the universe, and then we grieve over how lonely we feel. We ignore our inherent connectedness to all other beings and decide that "I" have to get more for "me"; then we marvel at how greedy and insensitive human beings are. And on it goes. Every evil deed, every example of heartlessness in the world, stems directly from this false sense of "me" as distinct from everything else.

If you explode the illusion of that one concept, your whole universe changes. Don't expect to be able to do this overnight, though. You spent your whole life building up that concept, reinforcing it with every thought, word, and deed over all those years. It is not going to evaporate instantly. But it will pass if you give it enough time and attention. Vipassana meditation is a process by which that concept is dissolved. Little by little, you chip away at it, just by observing it.

The “I” concept is a process. It is something we are constantly doing. With vipassana we learn to see that we are doing it, when we are doing it, and how we are doing it. Then that mindset moves and fades away, like a cloud passing through a clear sky. We are left in a state where we can decide to do it or not, whichever seems appropriate to the situation. The compulsiveness is gone: now we have a choice.

These are all major insights. Each one is a deep-reaching understanding of one of the fundamental issues of human existence. They do not occur quickly, nor without considerable effort. But the payoff is big. They lead to a total transformation of your life. Every second of your existence thereafter is changed. The meditator who pushes all the way down this track achieves perfect mental health, a pure love for all that lives, and complete cessation of suffering. That is no small goal. But you don't have to go the whole way to reap benefits. The benefits start right away, and they pile up over the years. It is a cumulative function: the more you sit, the more you learn about the real nature of your own existence. The more hours you spend in meditation, the greater your ability to calmly observe every impulse and intention, thought and emotion, just as it arises in the mind. Your progress to liberation is measured in hours on the cushion. And you can stop during the process any time you feel you've had enough. There is no mandating rule but your own desire to see the true quality of life, to enhance your own existence and that of others.

Vipassana meditation is inherently experiential, not theoretical. In the practice of meditation you become sensitive to the actual experience of living, to how things actually feel. You do not sit around developing sublime thoughts about living. You live. Vipassana meditation, more than anything else, is learning to live.

## CHAPTER 10

# *Dealing with Problems*

**Y**OU ARE GOING to run into problems in your meditation. Everybody does. Problems come in all shapes and sizes, and the only thing you can be absolutely certain about is that you will have some. The main trick in dealing with obstacles is to adopt the right attitude. Difficulties are an integral part of your practice. They aren't something to be avoided; they are to be used. They provide invaluable opportunities for learning.

The reason we are all stuck in life's mud is that we ceaselessly run from our problems and after our desires. Meditation provides us with a laboratory situation in which we can examine this syndrome and devise strategies for dealing with it. The various snags and hassles that arise during meditation are grist for the mill. They are the material with which we work. There is no pleasure without some degree of pain. There is no pain without some amount of pleasure. Life is composed of joys and miseries. They go hand in hand. Meditation is no exception. You will experience good times and bad times, ecstasies and fear.

So don't be surprised when you hit some experience that feels like a brick wall. Don't think you are special. All seasoned meditators have had their own brick walls. They come up again and again. Just expect them and be ready to cope. Your ability to cope with trouble depends upon your attitude. If you can learn to regard these hassles as opportunities, as chances to develop in your practice, you'll make

progress. Your ability to deal with some issue that arises in meditation will carry over into the rest of your life and allow you to smooth out big issues that really bother you. If you try to avoid each piece of nastiness that arises in meditation, you are reinforcing the habit that has already made life seem so unbearable at times.

It is essential to learn to confront the less pleasant aspects of existence. Our job as meditators is to learn to be patient with ourselves, to see ourselves in an unbiased way, complete with all our sorrows and inadequacies. We have to learn to be kind to ourselves. In the long run, avoiding unpleasantness is a very unkind thing to do to yourself. Paradoxically, kindness entails confronting unpleasantness when it arises.

One popular human strategy for dealing with difficulty is auto-suggestion: when something nasty pops up, you convince yourself it is not there, or you convince yourself it is pleasant rather than unpleasant. The Buddha's tactic is quite the reverse. Rather than hide it or disguise it, the Buddha's teaching urges you to examine it to death. Buddhism advises you not to implant feelings that you don't really have or avoid feelings that you do have. If you are miserable you are miserable; that is the reality, that is what is happening, so confront that. Look it square in the eye without flinching. When you are having a bad time, examine that experience, observe it mindfully, study the phenomenon and learn its mechanics. The way out of a trap is to study the trap itself, learn how it is built. You do this by taking the thing apart piece by piece. The trap can't trap you if it has been taken to pieces. The result is freedom.

This point is essential, but it is one of the least understood aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Those who have studied Buddhism superficially are quick to conclude that it is pessimistic, always harping on unpleasant things like suffering, always urging us to confront the uncomfortable realities of pain, death, and illness. Buddhist thinkers

do not regard themselves as pessimists—quite the opposite, actually. Pain exists in the universe; some measure of it is unavoidable. Learning to deal with it is not pessimism, but a very pragmatic form of optimism. How would you deal with the death of your spouse? How would you feel if you lost your mother tomorrow? Or your sister or your closest friend? Suppose you lost your job, your savings, and the use of your legs, all on the same day; could you face the prospect of spending the rest of your life in a wheelchair? How are you going to cope with the pain of terminal cancer if you contract it, and how will you deal with your own death when that approaches? You may escape most of these misfortunes, but you won't escape all of them. Most of us lose friends and relatives at some time during our lives; all of us get sick now and then; and all of us will die someday. You can suffer through things like that or you can face them openly—the choice is yours.

Pain is inevitable, suffering is not. Pain and suffering are two different animals. If any of these tragedies strike you in your present state of mind, you will suffer. The habit patterns that presently control your mind will lock you into that suffering, and there will be no escape. A bit of time spent in learning alternatives to those habit patterns is time well invested. Most human beings spend all their energies devising ways to increase their pleasure and decrease their pain. Buddhism does not advise that you cease this activity altogether. Money and security are fine. Pain should be avoided whenever possible. Nobody is telling you to give away every possession or seek out needless pain, but Buddhism does advise you to invest time and energy in learning to deal with unpleasantness, because some pain is unavoidable. When you see a truck bearing down on you, by all means jump out of the way. But spend some time in meditation, too. Learning to deal with discomfort is the only way you'll be ready to handle the truck you didn't see.

Problems will arise in your practice. Some of them will be physical, some will be emotional, and some will be attitudinal. All of them can be confronted and each has its own specific response. All of them are opportunities to free yourself.

### **PROBLEM 1: PHYSICAL PAIN**

Nobody likes pain, yet everybody has some at one time or another. It is one of life's most common experiences and is bound to arise in your meditation in one form or another.

Handling pain is a two-stage process. First, get rid of the pain, if possible, or at least get rid of it as much as possible. Then, if some pain lingers, use it as an object of meditation. The first step is physical handling. Maybe the pain is an illness of one sort or another, a headache, fever, bruises, or whatever. In this case, employ standard medical treatments before you sit down to meditate: take your medicine, apply your liniment, do whatever you ordinarily would do.

Then there are certain pains that are specific to the seated posture. If you never spend much time sitting cross-legged on the floor, there will be an adjustment period. Some discomfort is nearly inevitable. According to where the pain is, there are specific remedies. If the pain is in the leg or knees, check your pants. If they are tight or made of thick material, that could be the problem. Try to change it. Check your cushion, too. It should be about three inches in height when compressed. If the pain is around your waist, try loosening your belt. Loosen the waistband of your pants if that is necessary. If you experience pain in your lower back, your posture is probably at fault. Slouching will never be comfortable, so straighten up. Don't be tight or rigid, but do keep your spine erect. Pain in the neck or upper back has several sources. The first is improper hand position. Your hands should be resting comfortably in your lap. Don't pull them up to your



waist. Relax your arms and your neck muscles. Don't let your head droop forward. Keep it up and aligned with the rest of the spine.

After you have made all these various adjustments, you may find you still have some lingering pain. If that is the case, try step two. Make the pain your object of meditation. Don't jump up and don't get excited. Just observe the pain mindfully. When the pain becomes demanding, you will find it pulling your attention off the breath. Don't fight back. Just let your attention slide easily over onto the simple sensation. Go into the pain fully. Don't block the experience. Explore the feeling. Get beyond your avoiding reaction and go into the pure sensations that lie below that.

You will discover that there are two things present. The first is the simple sensation—pain itself. Second is your resistance to that sensation. Resistance reaction is partly mental and partly physical. The physical part consists of tensing the muscles in and around the painful area. Relax those muscles. Take them one by one and relax each one very thoroughly. This step alone will probably diminish the pain significantly. Then go after the mental side of the resistance. Just as you are tensing physically, you are also tensing psychologically. You are clamping down mentally on the sensation of pain, trying to screen it off and reject it from consciousness. The rejection is a wordless “I don't like this feeling” or “go away” attitude. It is very subtle. But it is there, and you can find it if you really look. Locate it and relax that, too.

That last part is more subtle. There are really no human words to describe this action precisely. The best way to get a handle on it is by analogy. Examine what you did to those tight muscles and transfer that same action over to the mental sphere; relax the mind in the same way that you relax the body. Buddhism recognizes that body and mind are tightly linked. This is so true that many people will not see this as a two-step procedure. For them to relax the body is to

relax the mind and vice versa. These people will experience the entire relaxation, mental and physical, as a single process. In any case, just let go completely until your awareness slows down past that barrier of resistance and relaxes into the pure flowing sensation beneath. The resistance was a barrier that you yourself erected. It was a gap, a sense of distance between self and others. It was a borderline between “me” and “the pain.” Dissolve that barrier, and separation vanishes. You slow down into that sea of surging sensation, and you merge with the pain. You become the pain. You watch its ebb and flow and something surprising happens. It no longer hurts. Suffering is gone. Only the pain remains, an experience, nothing more. The “me” who was being hurt has gone. The result is freedom from pain.

This is an incremental process. In the beginning, you can expect to succeed with small pains and be defeated by big ones. Like most of our skills, it grows with practice. The more you practice, the more pain you can handle. Please understand fully: There is no masochism being advocated here. Self-mortification is not the point. This is an exercise in awareness, not in self-torture. If the pain becomes excruciating, go ahead and move, but move slowly and mindfully. Observe your movements. See how it feels to move. Watch what it does to the pain. Watch the pain diminish. Try not to move too much, though. The less you move, the easier it is to remain fully mindful. New meditators sometimes say they have trouble remaining mindful when pain is present. This difficulty stems from a misunderstanding. These students are conceiving mindfulness as something distinct from the experience of pain. It is not. Mindfulness never exists by itself. It always has some object, and one object is as good as another. Pain is a mental state. You can be mindful of pain just as you are mindful of breathing.

The rules we covered in chapter 4 apply to pain just as they apply to any other mental state. You must be careful not to reach beyond

the sensation and not to fall short of it. Don't add anything to it, and don't miss any part of it. Don't muddy the pure experience with concepts or pictures or discursive thinking. And keep your awareness right in the present time, right with the pain, so that you won't miss its beginning or its end. Pain not viewed in the clear light of mindfulness gives rise to emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, or anger. If it is properly viewed, we have no such reaction. It will be just sensation, just simple energy. Once you have learned this technique with physical pain, you can then generalize it to the rest of your life. You can use it on any unpleasant sensation. What works on pain will work on anxiety or chronic depression as well. This technique is one of life's most useful and applicable skills. It is patience.

## **PROBLEM 2: LEGS GOING TO SLEEP**

It is very common for beginners to have their legs fall asleep or go numb during meditation. They are simply not accustomed to the cross-legged posture. Some people get very anxious about this. They feel they must get up and move around. A few are completely convinced that they will get gangrene from lack of circulation. Numbness in the leg is nothing to worry about. It is caused by nerve pinch, not by lack of circulation. You can't damage the tissues of your legs by sitting. So relax. When your legs fall asleep in meditation, just mindfully observe the phenomenon. Examine what it feels like. It may be sort of uncomfortable, but it is not painful unless you tense up. Just stay calm and watch it. It does not matter if your legs go numb and stay that way for the whole period. After you have meditated for some time, that numbness will gradually disappear. Your body simply adjusts to daily practice. Then you can sit for very long sessions with no numbness whatsoever.

**PROBLEM 3: ODD SENSATIONS**

People experience all manner of varied phenomena in meditation. Some people get itches. Others feel tingling, deep relaxation, a feeling of lightness, or a floating sensation. You may feel yourself growing or shrinking or rising up in the air. Beginners often get quite excited over such sensations. Don't worry, you are not likely to levitate any time soon. As relaxation sets in, the nervous system simply begins to pass sensory signals more efficiently. Large amounts of previously blocked sensory data can pour through, giving rise to all kinds of unique sensations. It does not signify anything in particular. It is just sensation. So simply employ the normal technique. Watch it come up and watch it pass away. Don't get involved.

**PROBLEM 4: DROWSINESS**

It is quite common to experience drowsiness during meditation. You become very calm and relaxed. That is exactly what is supposed to happen. Unfortunately, we ordinarily experience this lovely state only when we are falling asleep, and we associate it with that process. So naturally, you begin to drift off. When you find this happening, apply your mindfulness to the state of drowsiness itself. Drowsiness has certain definite characteristics. It does certain things to your thought process. Find out what. It has certain bodily feelings associated with it. Locate those.

This inquisitive awareness is the direct opposite of drowsiness, and will evaporate it. If it does not, then you should suspect a physical cause of your sleepiness. Search that out and handle it. If you have just eaten a large meal, that could be the cause. It is best to eat lightly if you are about to meditate. Or wait an hour after a big meal. And don't overlook the obvious either. If you have been out hauling

bricks all day, you are naturally going to be tired. The same is true if you only got a few hours of sleep the night before. Take care of your body's physical needs. Then meditate. Do not give in to sleepiness. Stay awake and mindful, for sleep and meditative concentration are diametrically opposed experiences. You will not gain any new insight from sleep but only from meditation. If you are very sleepy, then take a deep breath and hold it as long as you can. Then breathe out slowly. Take another deep breath again, hold it as long as you can, and breathe out slowly. Repeat this exercise until your body warms up and sleepiness fades away. Then return to your breath.

### **PROBLEM 5: INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE**

An overactive, jumping attention is something that everybody experiences from time to time. It is generally handled by the techniques presented in the chapter on distractions. You should also be informed, however, that there are certain external factors that contribute to this phenomenon. And these are best handled by simple adjustments in your schedule. Mental images are powerful entities. They can remain in the mind for long periods. All of the storytelling arts are direct manipulation of such material, and if the writer has done his job well, the characters and images presented will have a powerful and lingering effect on the mind. If you have been to the best movie of the year, the meditation that follows is going to be full of those images. If you are halfway through the scariest horror novel you ever read, your meditation is going to be full of monsters. So switch the order of events. Do your meditation first. Then read or go to the movies.

Another influential factor is your own emotional state. If there is some real conflict in your life, that agitation will carry over into meditation. Try to resolve your immediate daily conflicts before meditation when you can. Your life will run more smoothly, and you won't be

pondering uselessly in your practice. But don't use this advice as a way to avoid meditation. Sometimes you can't resolve every issue before you sit. Just go ahead and sit anyway. Use your meditation to let go of all the egocentric attitudes that keep you trapped within your own limited viewpoint. Your problems will resolve much more easily thereafter. And then there are those days when it seems that the mind will never rest, but you can't locate any apparent cause. Remember the cyclic alternation we spoke of earlier. Meditation goes in cycles. You have good days and you have bad days.

Vipassana meditation is primarily an exercise in awareness. Emptying the mind is not as important as being mindful of what the mind is doing. If you are frantic and you can't do a thing to stop it, just observe. It is all you. The result will be one more step forward in your journey of self-exploration. Above all, don't get frustrated over the nonstop chatter of your mind. That babble is just one more thing to be mindful of.

## **PROBLEM 6: BOREDOM**

It is difficult to imagine anything more inherently boring than sitting still for an hour with nothing to do but feel the air going in and out of your nose. You are going to run into boredom repeatedly in your meditation. Everybody does. Boredom is a mental state and should be treated as such. A few simple strategies will help you to cope.

### *Tactic A: Reestablish true mindfulness*

If the breath seems an exceedingly dull thing to observe over and over, you may rest assured of one thing: you have ceased to observe the process with true mindfulness. Mindfulness is never boring. Look again. Don't assume that you know what breath is. Don't take it for granted that you have already seen everything there is to see.

If you do, you are conceptualizing the process. You are not observing its living reality. When you are clearly mindful of the breath or of anything else, it is never boring. Mindfulness looks at everything with the eyes of a child, with a sense of wonder. Mindfulness sees every moment as if it were the first and the only moment in the universe. So look again.

*Tactic B: Observe your mental state*

Look at your state of boredom mindfully. What is boredom? Where is boredom? What does it feel like? What are its mental components? Does it have any physical feeling? What does it do to your thought process? Take a fresh look at boredom, as if you have never experienced that state before.

**PROBLEM 7: FEAR**

States of fear sometimes arise during meditation for no discernible reason. It is a common phenomenon, and there can be a number of causes. You may be experiencing the effect of something repressed long ago. Remember, thoughts arise first in the unconscious. The emotional contents of a thought complex often leak through into your conscious awareness long before the thought itself surfaces. If you sit through the fear, the memory itself may bubble up to a point where you can endure it. Or you may be dealing directly with the fear that we all fear: “fear of the unknown.” At some point in your meditation career you will be struck with the seriousness of what you are actually doing. You are tearing down the wall of illusion you have always used to explain life to yourself and to shield yourself from the intense flame of reality. You are about to meet ultimate truth face to face. That is scary. But it has to be dealt with eventually. Go ahead and dive right in.

A third possibility: the fear that you are feeling may be self-generated. It may be arising out of unskillful concentration. You may have set an unconscious program to “examine what comes up.” Thus, when a frightening fantasy arises, concentration locks onto it, and the fantasy feeds on the energy of your attention and grows. The real problem here is that mindfulness is weak. If mindfulness was strongly developed, it would notice this switch of attention as soon as it occurred and handle the situation in the usual manner. No matter what the source of your fear, mindfulness is the cure. Observe the fear exactly as it is. Don’t cling to it. Just watch it rising and growing. Study its effect. See how it makes you feel and how it affects your body. When you find yourself in the grip of horror fantasies, simply observe those mindfully. Watch the pictures as pictures. See memories as memories. Observe the emotional reactions that come along and know them for what they are. Stand aside from the process and don’t get involved. Treat the whole dynamic as if you were a curious bystander. Most important, don’t fight the situation. Don’t try to repress the memories or the feelings or the fantasies. Just step out of the way and let the whole mess bubble up and flow past. It can’t hurt you. It is just memory. It is only fantasy. It is nothing but fear.

When you let fear run its course in the arena of conscious attention, it won’t sink back into the unconscious. It won’t come back to haunt you later. It will be gone for good.

### **PROBLEM 8: AGITATION**

Restlessness is often a cover-up for some deeper experience taking place in the unconscious. We humans are great at repressing things. Rather than confronting some unpleasant thought we experience, we try to bury it so we won’t have to deal with the issue. Unfortunately, we usually don’t succeed, at least not fully. We hide the



thought, but the mental energy we use to cover it up sits there and boils. The result is that sense of unease that we call agitation or restlessness. There is nothing you can put your finger on. But you don't feel at ease. You can't relax. When this uncomfortable state arises in meditation, just observe it. Don't let it rule you. Don't jump up and run off. And don't struggle with it and try to make it go away. Just let it be there and watch it closely. Then the repressed material will eventually surface, and you will find out what you have been worrying about.

The unpleasant experience that you have been trying to avoid could be almost anything: guilt, greed, or other problems. It could be low-grade pain or subtle sickness or approaching illness. Whatever it is, let it arise and look at it mindfully. If you just sit still and observe your agitation, it will eventually pass. Sitting through restlessness is a little breakthrough in your meditation career. It will teach you a lot. You will find that agitation is actually rather a superficial mental state. It is inherently ephemeral. It comes and it goes. It has no real grip on you at all.

### **PROBLEM 9: TRYING TOO HARD**

Advanced meditators are generally found to be pretty jovial people. They possess one of the most valuable of all human treasures, a sense of humor. It is not the superficial witty repartee of the talk show host. It is a real sense of humor. They can laugh at their own human failures. They can chuckle at personal disasters. Beginners in meditation are often much too serious for their own good. It is important to learn to loosen up in your session, to relax in your meditation. You need to learn to watch objectively whatever happens. You can't do that if you are tensed and striving, taking it all so very, very seriously.

New meditators are often overly eager for results. They are full of

enormous and inflated expectations. They jump right in and expect incredible results in no time flat. They push. They tense. They sweat and strain, and it is all so terribly, terribly grim and solemn. This state of tension is the antithesis of mindfulness. Naturally, they achieve little. Then they decide that this meditation is not so exciting after all. It did not give them what they wanted. They chuck it aside. It should be pointed out that you learn about meditation only by meditating. You learn what meditation is all about and where it leads only through direct experience of the thing itself. Therefore the beginner does not know where he is headed because he has developed little sense of where his practice is leading.

The novice's expectation is naturally unrealistic and uninformed. Newcomers to meditation expect all the wrong things, and those expectations do no good at all. They get in the way. Trying too hard leads to rigidity and unhappiness, to guilt and self-condemnation. When you are trying too hard, your effort becomes mechanical, and that defeats mindfulness before it even gets started. You are well advised to drop all that. Drop your expectations and straining. Simply meditate with a steady and balanced effort. Enjoy your meditation and don't load yourself down with sweat and struggles. Just be mindful. The meditation itself will take care of the future.

#### **PROBLEM 10: DISCOURAGEMENT**

The upshot of pushing too hard is frustration. You are in a state of tension. You get nowhere. You realize that you are not making the progress you expected, so you get discouraged. You feel like a failure. It is all a very natural cycle, but a totally avoidable one. Striving after unrealistic expectations is the source. Nevertheless, it is a common enough syndrome and, in spite of all the best advice, you may find it happening to you. There is a solution. If you find yourself discour-

aged, just observe your state of mind clearly. Don't add anything to it. Just watch it. A sense of failure is only another ephemeral emotional reaction. If you get involved, it feeds on your energy and it grows. If you simply stand aside and watch it, it passes away.

If you are discouraged over your perceived failure in meditation, that is especially easy to deal with. You feel you have failed in your practice. You have failed to be mindful. Simply become mindful of that sense of failure. You have just reestablished your mindfulness with that single step. The reason for your sense of failure is nothing but a memory. There is no such thing as failure in meditation. There are setbacks and difficulties. But there is no failure unless you give up entirely. Even if you have spent twenty solid years getting nowhere, you can be mindful at any second you choose. It is your decision. Regretting is only one more way of being unmindful. The instant that you realize that you have been unmindful, that realization itself is an act of mindfulness. So continue the process. Don't get sidetracked by an emotional reaction.

## **PROBLEM 11: RESISTANCE TO MEDITATION**

There are times when you don't feel like meditating. The very idea seems obnoxious. Missing a single practice session is scarcely important, but it very easily becomes a habit. It is wiser to push on through the resistance. Go sit anyway. Observe this feeling of aversion. In most cases it is a passing emotion, a flash in the pan that will evaporate right in front of your eyes. Five minutes after you sit down it is gone. In other cases it is due to some sour mood that day, and it lasts longer. Still, it does pass. And it is better to get rid of it in twenty or thirty minutes of meditation than to carry it around with you and let it ruin the rest of your day. At other times, resistance may be due to some difficulty you are having with the practice itself. You may or

may not know what that difficulty is. If the problem is known, handle it by one of the techniques given in this book. Once the problem is gone, resistance will be gone. If the problem is unknown, then you are going to have to tough it out. Just sit through the resistance and observe it mindfully. It will pass. Then the problem causing it will probably bubble up in its wake, and you can deal with that.

If resistance to meditation is a common feature of your practice, then you should suspect some subtle error in your basic attitude. Meditation is not a ritual conducted in a particular posture. It is not a painful exercise, or period of enforced boredom. And it is not a grim, solemn obligation. Meditation is mindfulness. It is a new way of seeing and it is a form of play. Meditation is your friend. Come to regard it as such, and resistance will disappear like smoke on a summer breeze.

If you try all these possibilities and the resistance remains, then there may be a problem. Certain metaphysical snags that meditators sometimes encounter go beyond the scope of this book. It is not common for new meditators to hit these, but it can happen. Don't give up. Go and get help. Seek out qualified teachers of the vipassana style of meditation and ask them to help you resolve the situation. Such people exist for exactly that purpose.

## **PROBLEM 12: STUPOR OR DULLNESS**

We have already discussed the sinking mind phenomenon. But there is a special route to that state you should watch out for. Mental dullness can result as an unwanted byproduct of deepening concentration. As your relaxation deepens, muscles loosen and nerve transmissions change. This produces a very calm and light feeling in the body. You feel very still and somewhat divorced from the body. This is a very pleasant state, and at first your concentration is quite

good, nicely centered on the breath. As it continues, however, the pleasant feelings intensify and they distract your attention from the breath. You start to really enjoy the state and your mindfulness goes way down. Your attention winds up scattered, drifting listlessly through vague clouds of bliss. The result is a very unmindful state, sort of an ecstatic stupor. The cure, of course, is mindfulness. Mindfully observe these phenomena and they will dissipate. When blissful feelings arise accept them. There is no need to avoid them, but don't get wrapped up in them. They are physical feelings, so treat them as such. Observe feelings as feelings. Observe dullness as dullness. Watch them rise and watch them pass. Don't get involved.

You will have problems in meditation. Everybody does. You can treat them as terrible torments or as challenges to be overcome. If you regard them as burdens, your suffering will only increase. If you regard them as opportunities to learn and to grow, your spiritual prospects are unlimited.

## CHAPTER 13

# Mindfulness (Sati)

MINDFULNESS is the English translation of the Pali word *sati*. *Sati* is an activity. What exactly is that? There can be no precise answer, at least not in words. Words are devised by the symbolic levels of the mind, and they describe those realities with which symbolic thinking deals. Mindfulness is presymbolic. It is not shackled to logic. Nevertheless, mindfulness can be experienced—rather easily—and it can be described, as long as you keep in mind that the words are only fingers pointing at the moon. They are not the moon itself. The actual experience lies beyond the words and above the symbols. Mindfulness could be described in completely different terms than will be used here, and each description could still be correct.

Mindfulness is a subtle process that you are using at this very moment. The fact that this process lies above and beyond words does not make it unreal—quite the reverse. Mindfulness is the reality that gives rise to words—the words that follow are simply pale shadows of reality. So it is important to understand that everything that follows here is analogy. It is not going to make perfect sense. It will always remain beyond verbal logic. But you can experience it. The meditation technique called vipassana (insight) that was introduced by the Buddha about twenty-five centuries ago is a set of mental activities specifically aimed at experiencing a state of uninterrupted mindfulness.

When you first become aware of something, there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the thing, before you identify it. That is a state of awareness. Ordinarily, this state is short-lived. It is that flashing split second just as you focus your eyes on the thing, just as you focus your mind on the thing, just before you objectify it, clamp down on it mentally, and segregate it from the rest of existence. It takes place just before you start thinking about it—before your mind says, “Oh, it’s a dog.” That flowing, soft-focused moment of pure awareness is mindfulness. In that brief flashing mind-moment you experience a thing as an un-thing. You experience a softly flowing moment of pure experience that is interlocked with the rest of reality, not separate from it. Mindfulness is very much like what you see with your peripheral vision as opposed to the hard focus of normal or central vision. Yet this moment of soft, unfocused, awareness contains a very deep sort of knowing that is lost as soon as you focus your mind and objectify the object into a thing. In the process of ordinary perception, the mindfulness step is so fleeting as to be unobservable. We have developed the habit of squandering our attention on all the remaining steps, focusing on the perception, cognizing the perception, labeling it, and most of all, getting involved in a long string of symbolic thought about it. That original moment of mindfulness is rapidly passed over. It is the purpose of vipassana meditation to train us to prolong that moment of awareness.

When this mindfulness is prolonged by using proper techniques, you find that this experience is profound and that it changes your entire view of the universe. This state of perception has to be learned, however, and it takes regular practice. Once you learn the technique, you will find that mindfulness has many interesting aspects.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is mirror-thought. It reflects only what is presently happening and in exactly the way it is happening. There are no biases.

Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation. It is that ability of the mind to observe without criticism. With this ability, one sees things without condemnation or judgment. One is surprised by nothing. One simply takes a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in their natural states. One does not decide and does not judge. One just observes. Please note that when we say, “One does not decide and does not judge,” what we mean is that the meditator observes experiences very much like a scientist observing an object under a microscope without any preconceived notions, only to see the object exactly as it is. In the same way the meditator notices impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

It is psychologically impossible for us to objectively observe what is going on within us if we do not at the same time accept the occurrence of our various states of mind. This is especially true with unpleasant states of mind. In order to observe our own fear, we must accept the fact that we are afraid. We can't examine our own depression without accepting it fully. The same is true for irritation and agitation, frustration, and all those other uncomfortable emotional states. You can't examine something fully if you are busy rejecting its existence. Whatever experience we may be having, mindfulness just accepts it. It is simply another of life's occurrences, just another thing to be aware of. No pride, no shame, nothing personal at stake—what is there is there.

Mindfulness is an impartial watchfulness. It does not take sides. It does not get hung up in what is perceived. It just perceives. Mindfulness does not get infatuated with the good mental states. It does not try to sidestep the bad mental states. There is no clinging to the



pleasant, no fleeing from the unpleasant. Mindfulness treats all experiences equally, all thoughts equally, all feelings equally. Nothing is suppressed. Nothing is repressed. Mindfulness does not play favorites.

Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is “bare attention.” It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts. It does not get hung up on ideas or opinions or memories. It just looks. Mindfulness registers experiences, but it does not compare them. It does not label them or categorize them. It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory. It is, rather, the direct and immediate experiencing of whatever is happening, without the medium of thought. It comes before thought in the perceptual process.

Mindfulness is present-moment awareness. It takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present. It stays forever in the present, perpetually on the crest of the ongoing wave of passing time. If you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is memory. When you then become aware that you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is mindfulness. If you then conceptualize the process and say to yourself, “Oh, I am remembering,” that is thinking.

Mindfulness is nonegotistic alertness. It takes place without reference to self. With mindfulness one sees all phenomena without references to concepts like “me,” “my,” or “mine.” For example, suppose there is pain in your left leg. Ordinary consciousness would say, “I have a pain.” Using mindfulness, one would simply note the sensation as a sensation. One would not tack on that extra concept “I.” Mindfulness stops one from adding anything to perception or subtracting anything from it. One does not enhance anything. One does not emphasize anything. One just observes exactly what is there—without distortion.

Mindfulness is awareness of change. It is observing the passing flow of experience. It is watching things as they are changing. It is seeing the birth, growth, and maturity of all phenomena. It is watching phenomena decay and die. Mindfulness is watching things moment by moment, continuously. It is observing all phenomena—physical, mental, or emotional—whatever is presently taking place in the mind. One just sits back and watches the show. Mindfulness is the observance of the basic nature of each passing phenomenon. It is watching the thing arising and passing away. It is seeing how that thing makes us feel and how we react to it. It is observing how it affects others. In mindfulness, one is an unbiased observer whose sole job is to keep track of the constantly passing show of the universe within.

Please note that last point. In mindfulness, one watches the universe within. The meditator who is developing mindfulness is not concerned with the external universe. It is there, but in meditation, one's field of study is one's own experience, one's thoughts, one's feelings, and one's perceptions. In meditation, one is one's own laboratory. The universe within has an enormous fund of information containing the reflection of the external world and much more. An examination of this material leads to total freedom.

Mindfulness is participatory observation. The meditator is both participant and observer at one and the same time. If one watches one's emotions or physical sensations, one is feeling them at that very same moment. Mindfulness is not an intellectual awareness. It is just awareness. The mirror-thought metaphor breaks down here. Mindfulness is objective, but it is not cold or unfeeling. It is the wakeful experience of life, an alert participation in the ongoing process of living.

Mindfulness is extremely difficult to define in words—not because it is complex, but because it is too simple and open. The

same problem crops up in every area of human experience. The most basic concept is always the most difficult to pin down. Look at a dictionary and you will see a clear example. Long words generally have concise definitions, but short basic words like “the” and “be,” can have definitions a page long. And in physics, the most difficult functions to describe are the most basic—those that deal with the most fundamental realities of quantum mechanics. Mindfulness is a presymbolic function. You can play with word symbols all day long and you will never pin it down completely. We can never fully express what it is. However, we can say what it does.

### THREE FUNDAMENTAL ACTIVITIES

There are three fundamental activities of mindfulness. We can use these activities as functional definitions of the term: (a) mindfulness reminds us of what we are supposed to be doing, (b) it sees things as they really are, and (c) it sees the true nature of all phenomena. Let's examine these definitions in greater detail.

#### *Mindfulness reminds you of what you are supposed to be doing*

In meditation, you put your attention on one item. When your mind wanders from this focus, it is mindfulness that reminds you that your mind is wandering and what you are supposed to be doing. It is mindfulness that brings your mind back to the object of meditation. All of this occurs instantaneously and without internal dialogue. Mindfulness is not thinking. Repeated practice in meditation establishes this function as a mental habit that then carries over into the rest of your life. A serious meditator pays bare attention to occurrences all the time, day in, day out, whether formally sitting in meditation or not. This is a very lofty ideal toward which those who meditate may be

working for a period of years or even decades. Our habit of getting stuck in thought is years old, and that habit will hang on in the most tenacious manner. The only way out is to be equally persistent in the cultivation of constant mindfulness. When mindfulness is present, you will notice when you become stuck in your thought patterns. It is that very noticing that allows you to back out of the thought process and free yourself from it. Mindfulness then returns your attention to its proper focus. If you are meditating at that moment, then your focus will be the formal object of meditation. If you are not in formal meditation, it will be just a pure application of bare attention itself, just a pure noticing of whatever comes up without getting involved—“Ah, this comes up...and now this, and now this...and now this.”

Mindfulness is at one and the same time both bare attention itself and the function of reminding us to pay bare attention if we have ceased to do so. Bare attention is noticing. It reestablishes itself simply by noticing that it has not been present. As soon as you are noticing that you have not been noticing, then by definition you are noticing and then you are back again to paying bare attention.

Mindfulness creates its own distinct feeling in consciousness. It has a flavor—a light, clear, energetic flavor. By comparison, conscious thought is heavy, ponderous, and picky. But here again, these are just words. Your own practice will show you the difference. Then you will probably come up with your own words and the words used here will become superfluous. Remember, practice is the thing.

*Mindfulness sees things as they really are*

Mindfulness adds nothing to perception and it subtracts nothing. It distorts nothing. It is bare attention and just looks at whatever comes up. Conscious thought pastes things over our experience, loads us down with concepts and ideas, immerses us in a churning vortex of plans and worries, fears and fantasies. When mindful, you don't play

that game. You just notice exactly what arises in the mind, then you notice the next thing. “Ah, this...and this...and now this.” It is really very simple.

*Mindfulness sees the true nature of all phenomena*

Mindfulness and only mindfulness can perceive that the three prime characteristics that Buddhism teaches are the deepest truths of existence. In Pali these three are called *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anatta* (selflessness—the absence of a permanent, unchanging entity that we call Soul or Self). These truths are not presented in Buddhist teaching as dogmas demanding blind faith. Buddhists feel that these truths are universal and self-evident to anyone who cares to investigate in a proper way. Mindfulness is that method of investigation. Mindfulness alone has the power to reveal the deepest level of reality available to human observation. At this level of inspection, one sees the following: (a) all conditioned things are inherently transitory; (b) every worldly thing is, in the end, unsatisfying; and (c) there are really no entities that are unchanging or permanent, only processes.

Mindfulness works like an electron microscope. That is, it operates on so fine a level that one can actually directly perceive those realities that are at best theoretical constructs to the conscious thought process. Mindfulness actually sees the impermanent character of every perception. It sees the transitory and passing nature of everything that is perceived. It also sees the inherently unsatisfactory nature of all conditioned things. It sees that there is no point grabbing onto any of these passing shows; peace and happiness cannot be found that way. And finally, mindfulness sees the inherent selflessness of all phenomena. It sees the way that we have arbitrarily selected a certain bundle of perceptions, chopped them off from the

rest of the surging flow of experience, and then conceptualized them as separate, enduring entities. Mindfulness actually sees these things. It does not think about them, it sees them directly.

When it is fully developed, mindfulness sees these three attributes of existence directly, instantaneously, and without the intervening medium of conscious thought. In fact, even the attributes that we just covered are inherently unified. They don't really exist as separate items. They are purely the result of our struggle to take this fundamentally simple process called mindfulness and express it in the cumbersome and inadequate thought symbols of the conscious level. Mindfulness is a process, but it does not take place in steps. It is a holistic process that occurs as a unit: you notice your own lack of mindfulness; and that noticing itself is a result of mindfulness; and mindfulness is bare attention; and bare attention is noticing things exactly as they are without distortion; and the way they are is impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and selfless (*anatta*). It all takes place in the space of a few mind-moments. This does not mean, however, that you will instantly attain liberation (freedom from all human weaknesses) as a result of your first moment of mindfulness. Learning to integrate this material into your conscious life is quite another process. And learning to prolong this state of mindfulness is still another. They are joyous processes, however, and they are well worth the effort.

## MINDFULNESS (SATI) AND INSIGHT (VIPASSANA) MEDITATION

Mindfulness is the center of vipassana meditation and the key to the whole process. It is both the goal of this meditation and the means to that end. You reach mindfulness by being ever more mindful. One other Pali word that is translated into English as mindfulness is *appamada*, which means non-negligence or absence of madness. One

who attends constantly to what is really going on in the mind achieves the state of ultimate sanity.

The Pali term *sati* also bears the connotation of remembering. It is not memory in the sense of ideas and pictures from the past, but rather clear, direct, wordless knowing of what is and what is not, of what is correct and what is incorrect, of what we are doing and how we should go about it. Mindfulness reminds meditators to apply their attention to the proper object at the proper time and to exert precisely the amount of energy needed to do that job. When this energy is properly applied, a meditator stays constantly in a state of calm and alertness. As long as this condition is maintained, those mind-states called “hindrances” or “psychic irritants” cannot arise—there is no greed, hatred, lust, or laziness.

But we all are human and we all err. Most of us err repeatedly. Despite honest effort, meditators let their mindfulness slip now and then and find themselves stuck in some regrettable, but normal, human failure. It is mindfulness that notices that change. And it is mindfulness that reminds us to apply the energy required to pull ourselves out. These slips happen over and over, but their frequency decreases with practice.

Once mindfulness has pushed these mental defilements aside, more wholesome states of mind can take their place. Hatred makes way for loving friendliness, lust is replaced by detachment. It is mindfulness that notices this change, too, and that reminds the vipassana meditator to maintain that extra little mental sharpness needed to retain these more desirable states of mind. Mindfulness makes possible the growth of wisdom and compassion. Without mindfulness they cannot develop to full maturity.

Deeply buried in the mind, there lies a mechanism that accepts what the mind experiences as beautiful and pleasant and rejects

those experiences that are perceived as ugly and painful. This mechanism gives rise to those states of mind that we are training ourselves to avoid—things like greed, lust, hatred, aversion, and jealousy. We choose to avoid these hindrances, not because they are evil in the normal sense of the word, but because they are compulsive; because they take the mind over and capture the attention completely; because they keep going round and round in tight little circles of thought; and because they seal us off from living reality.

These hindrances cannot arise when mindfulness is present. Mindfulness is attention to present-moment reality, and therefore, directly antithetical to the dazed state of mind that characterizes impediments. As meditators, it is only when we let our mindfulness slip that the deep mechanisms of our mind take over—grasping, clinging, and rejecting. Then resistance emerges and obscures our awareness. We do not notice that the change is taking place—we are too busy with a thought of revenge, or greed, whatever it may be. While an untrained person will continue in this state indefinitely, a trained meditator will soon realize what is happening. It is mindfulness that notices the change. It is mindfulness that remembers the training received and that focuses our attention so that the confusion fades away. And it is mindfulness that then attempts to maintain itself indefinitely so that the resistance cannot arise again. Thus, mindfulness is the specific antidote for hindrances. It is both the cure and the preventive measure.

Fully developed mindfulness is a state of total nonattachment and utter absence of clinging to anything in the world. If we can maintain this state, no other means or device is needed to keep ourselves free of obstructions, to achieve liberation from our human weaknesses. Mindfulness is nonsuperficial awareness. It sees things deeply, down below the level of concepts and opinions. This sort of



deep observation leads to total certainty, a complete absence of confusion. It manifests itself primarily as a constant and unwavering attention that never flags and never turns away.

This pure and unstained investigative awareness not only holds mental hindrances at bay, it lays bare their very mechanism and destroys them. Mindfulness neutralizes defilements in the mind. The result is a mind that remains unstained and invulnerable, completely undisturbed by the ups and downs of life.



## *About the Author*

BHANTE HENEPOLA GUNARATANA was ordained at the age of twelve as a Buddhist monk in Maladeniya, Sri Lanka. In 1947, at age twenty, he was given higher ordination in Kandy. He received his education from Vidyasekhara Junior College in Gumpaha, Vidyalankara College in Kelaniya, and Buddhist Missionary College in Colombo. Subsequently he traveled to India for five years of missionary work for the Mahabodhi Society, serving the Harijana (“untouchable”) people in Sanchi, Delhi, and Bombay. Later he spent ten years as a missionary in Malaysia, serving as religious advisor to the Sasana Abhivurdhiwardhana Society, the Buddhist Missionary Society, and the Buddhist Youth Federation of Malaysia. He has been a teacher in Kishon Dial School and Temple Road Girls’ School and principal of the Buddhist Institute of Kuala Lumpur.

At the invitation of the Sasana Sevaka Society, he came to the United States in 1968 to serve as general secretary of the Buddhist Vihara Society of Washington, D.C. In 1980, he was appointed president of the society. During his years at the Vihara, from 1968 to 1988, he taught courses in Buddhism, conducted meditation retreats, and lectured widely throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Asia. In addition, from 1973 to 1988, Venerable Gunaratana served as Buddhist chaplain at American University.

He has also pursued his scholarly interests by earning a Ph.D. in philosophy from American University. He has taught courses on

Buddhism at American University, Georgetown University, and the University of Maryland. His books and articles have been published in Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, and the United States. *Mindfulness in Plain English* has been translated into many languages and published around the world. An abridged Thai translation has been selected for use in the high school curriculum throughout Thailand.

Since 1982 Bhante Gunaratana has been president of the Bhavana Society, a monastery and retreat center located in the woods of West Virginia (near the Shenandoah Valley), which he cofounded with Matthew Flickstein. Bhante Gunaratana resides at the Bhavana Society, where he ordains and trains monks and nuns, and offers retreats to the general public. He also travels frequently to lecture and lead retreats throughout the world.

In 2000, Bhante Gunaratana received an award for lifetime outstanding achievement from his alma mater, Vidyalandara College. Bhante Gunaratana is also the author of *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, *Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English*, and the memoir *Journey to Mindfulness*.