

CHAPTER 1

The Standard Meditation Practice

How does a monk live contemplating the body? He goes to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty place. He sits down cross-legged, holds his body erect and focuses on the breath in front of himself.

– *The Satipatthana Sutta*. page 90

The words ‘mindfulness’ and ‘meditation’ are often regarded as interchangeable, but can these activities occur separately? Can we meditate without being mindful or be mindful without meditating? To help distinguish these terms, I think that an explanation of meditation would be a good place to start.

What people actually do when they meditate is very simple, and remarkably similar for nearly everyone. Meditating could be an innate biological function, like language or musical appreciation, that we are all capable of, given the right circumstances. The basic procedure – the rootstock – is so uniform across cultures and eras that I call it The Standard Meditation Practice.

This is how you do it (I’ll now address you as a student). You sit in a chair or on the floor, or you lie down, with your eyes closed for 15 minutes or more. This is not sufficient in itself. You still need to ‘do’ something with your mind. You now focus in a gentle but deliberate, exploratory fashion on your breath or on your body in some way. This is the mental function we call ‘selective, sustained attention’.

While focusing on your body, you are bound to notice unrelated thoughts periodically, but you try to engage with them as little as possible. You ‘notice’ them but try not to ‘process’ them. This trouble-shooting

function is called ‘peripheral monitoring’ or ‘distraction control’ and it is a key attentional skill. It is just as important as sustaining focus on the body.

Within ten minutes your body is bound to relax, even with intermittent focus. It will usually take an extra five minutes for your mind to settle. You are instinctively gravitating towards a homeostatic set-point. This is the lowest degree of arousal and muscle tone possible without falling asleep. If you remain moderately alert and in control, as you should, your mind will also become much quieter than usual.

Occasionally you will go further than this. Your mind will fall silent for shorter or longer periods. When this happens, we call it a state of ‘body-mind stillness’. The Pali term for this is *passaddhi*,¹ which is also translated as ‘tranquility’.

This is the core of nearly all meditation practices: sitting still, eyes closed, focusing continuously on the body and monitoring peripheral thoughts for 15 minutes or more. With practice you gradually improve your ability to remain focused and to manage your thoughts efficiently. These are the two essential skills in any meditation practice: sustained attention to the body and the control of thought.

These are like the skills necessary for driving a car. They are not complicated, but you can’t approach body-mind stillness without them. They form the backbone for a huge range of practices. Yoga, Vipassana, Transcendental Meditation, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Tibetan and Zen practices tick all of those boxes.

Of course meditation can be far more elaborate. It is easy to add mantra, visualisation, special postures and rituals, spiritual beliefs and aspirations to the Standard Meditation Practice, even if these are ‘only’ placebos and props. People do benefit from styles they find congenial, and most need at least one or two props in place to meditate well. However in terms of relaxation and mental control, it is the Standard Meditation component of brand-name practices that does most of the work. If we are dehydrated, we need water. It doesn’t matter whether we take it in the form of tea, wine or a soft drink.

I estimate that 90% of regular meditators do what is essentially a Standard Meditation Practice. Furthermore, 90% of the body-mind benefits of any meditation probably come from the Standard Meditation Practice component within it. The ideological packaging that makes up

¹ I will usually write Pali and Sanskrit words in italics unless, like ‘karma’ and ‘Vipassana’, they have made the transition into vernacular English.

the extra 10% is far more prominent, but the Standard Meditation Practice is always the workhorse.

Tai Chi, yoga, prayer, positive thinking, chanting and reflections on spiritual ideas can also be regarded as meditations, but we usually think of them under their own designations. I also train people to meditate with eyes open, in various activities, and for very short periods as described in my book *The 5-Minute Meditator*, but I know how peculiar and ‘non-standard’ this is.

Whenever we think of meditation, something like the Standard Meditation Practice comes to mind, even for non-meditators. It is the universal paradigm. Stripped to its essence, ‘meditating’ means ‘focusing on the body.’ To do this means *not* pursuing your usual thoughts and *not* relating to the outer world. This primary emphasis on the body is reflected in the *Satipatthana Sutta*.² Its huge first section is called ‘Mindfulness of the Body’ and it presents 14 different ways of focusing on the body.

Tranquility and mindfulness

Let’s now make a distinction. Buddhism talks about ‘tranquility’ practices (Sanskrit: *samadhi*) and ‘mindfulness’ practices (Pali: *sati*). The Standard Meditation Practice is a tranquility practice. Novice-level *samadhi* practice leads to a relaxed body with some degree of mental stillness and emotional calm. Expert-level *samadhi* practice leads to the four stages of absorption or trance (Pali: *jhana*). It is what novices dream about when they hope to ‘make the mind go blank’. ‘Mindfulness meditation’ (*sati*) is not vastly different from the above. It just adds a higher degree of self-observation to an existing tranquility meditation.

Mindfulness is metacognitive. This means that you don’t just mechanically meditate and gradually feel better. You also monitor *how* you are meditating. This conscious perception of physical and mental phenomena leads to fine, intuitive adjustments which subtly accelerate the process. *Sati* also contributes to spin-off ‘insights’ or bright ideas that are unlikely to occur in pure tranquility meditations.

To meditate on the breath is a Standard Meditation Practice (*samadhi*). However we are also being mindful (*sati*) whenever we monitor what is

² In future, I will refer to this text indiscriminately as either the *Satipatthana Sutta* or *The Foundations of Mindfulness*, or simply as the *Sutta*. When I use the word ‘Satipatthana’ without italics, it refers to the method taught in the *Sutta*.

happening. When we check the quality of our focus, or resist distractions, or relax unnecessary tension, we are being mindful (*sati*) within a tranquility practice (*samadhi*). The Buddha said that to be mindful means that we know what is happening as it happens, *and can describe it to ourselves*. (See Chapter 14).

Mindfulness, like attention itself, has an important ‘error-detection’ function. We notice the discrepancies and imbalances between where we actually are (slightly tense and worried, for example) and where we want to be. This recognition helps the body’s homeostatic systems adjust towards the ideal. (‘Loosen that shoulder. Soften the breath. Abandon that thought.’) In other words, *sati* refines and accelerates the physiological movement towards body-mind stillness. If you just sit and wait and count the breaths with little reflection, the process will be much slower and may not seem worth the amount of time involved.

We can make another distinction. Tranquility meditation is goal-directed. It aims for an ideal state of body-mind stillness (*passaddhi*). When we are mindful however, we notice what is happening *in the moment*, which is hardly ever that perfect or ideal. Mindfulness (*sati*) has a different orientation: to see and evaluate things accurately, while they are actually happening.

So can we be mindful without sitting down and meditating for several minutes? Of course we can. ‘To be mindful’ in common usage – to pay attention to what we are doing – has no Standard Meditation Practice component at all. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) develops a very high degree of ‘Mindfulness of Thought’ without a hint of meditation. Similarly, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) recommends *very short* interventionist bursts of mindfulness as required.

Even in Buddhism, mindfulness is not reliant on meditation. In the *Sutta*, the Buddha said that we should be able to evaluate and fine-tune our thoughts, emotions and behaviour at any time and in any activity. So why do a formal Standard Meditation Practice at all?

Although the skills are simple to understand, practice is essential for improvement. Attending seminars or reading books on the subject, or even teaching it to clients, will increase our knowledge of mindfulness but not our ability to do it. The inertia of habit guarantees that we can’t improve our level of skill in any domain without deliberate, self-monitoring practice over time. Learning to relax quickly and consciously is a physical skill. Learning to control attention and thought is a cognitive

skill. Doing a formal sitting meditation is a good way to practise both at once.

Body-mind Stillness (*Passaddhi*)

A Standard Meditation Practice naturally gravitates towards a homeostatic ideal of inner stillness. This is a state in which the body is optimally relaxed: low muscle tone and low arousal. The body is no longer restless or primed for movement, and the mind is as calm and quiet as possible. The Buddha said that this inner stillness (*passaddhi*) is the antidote to the mental hindrance that he called ‘agitation and worry’. In other words, stillness dissolves anxiety.

This physical stillness matures into a mental silence. A well-directed, focused mind is not at the mercy of random thought, and the inner chatter really can stop for long periods. This mental control and inner stillness supports the delightful sense of space or ‘freedom’ that meditators often report. A meditator may even say, ‘My mind was completely empty’, but the reality is more nuanced.

The mind can feel very calm, but it is never empty or perfectly still. Our minds can no more stop completely than can our digestive or immune systems. The mind is obliged to continuously monitor sensory data, and to process what has happened in the immediate past, even when we are asleep. In other words, thinking never stops. Physical stillness and inner silence (*passaddhi*) is the state of optimal baseline cognitive functioning, but not complete vacancy.

Given these provisos, why is body-mind stillness so valuable? Why is it so important to be able to sit down, do nothing and be quiet? It is quite hard to do: just ask any schoolchild. It is akin to boredom and it doesn’t seem very productive. It turns out that being calm, centred and mentally controlled is foundational for many life skills.

Most of the psychological benefits of mindfulness start here. To sit still for long periods means learning to be ‘non-reactive’. A meditator learns to stop the compulsive inclination towards thought or action. He can notice an emerging thought without ‘elaborating’ on it. He can notice a physical impulse (i.e. towards food, drugs or anger) and let it fade. He can notice pain or a bad mood dispassionately and accept its presence, rather than trying to fix it.

In meditation, this is often described as a ‘just watching’ state, or as ‘nonjudgmental acceptance’, or as the ‘observer mind’. This leads to a

sense of emotional detachment and objectivity towards what is happening. Psychologists regard this lowering of reactivity, and the retraining of it as a habit, as crucial for emotional health. And it all relies on the control of attention.

Body-mind stillness, emotional detachment and the observer mind are values implicit in the Standard Meditation Practice, and they work synergistically. Body-mind stillness, as the control of arousal and muscle-tone, is a *physical* skill. Detachment is an *emotional* skill. The observer mind is a *cognitive* skill. Being still and doing almost nothing may seem like a waste of time, but it has many spin-off benefits. When we finish our Standard Meditation Practice, we should be physically calm, mentally clear, somewhat refreshed and above all, ready to re-enter the world of action.