

CHAPTER 10

Open Monitoring

In 1984 I did a 7-month retreat in a tiny hut high on a mountainside in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. My hut was 15 minutes' walk above a small retreat centre, which was itself 15 minutes above a dead-end valley road about 20 km from the nearest village. Each Wednesday afternoon I hauled my week's supplies up from the road, and usually spent that evening with my girlfriend in her hut nearby. Otherwise I enjoyed six days of total isolation each week – just me, the possums and the wild pigs. The panoramic views extended 80 miles to the east and I never saw or heard any other human activity.

So what did I do each day? 7-8 hours of sitting practice, some yoga, housework and long walks. I got up about 2-3 a.m. and sat until the first spark of sunlight cut the eastern horizon. I usually had a late morning sleep and a mid-afternoon sleep, and went to bed about 10-11 pm.

For the first month or two, I did various Tibetan practices, including the first half of the so-called 'Foundation Work'. This involved doing 108,000 full-length prostrations complete with mantra, visualisation and philosophical speculations. However Satipatthana¹, the training in continuous, targeted self-observation, was always my primary practice. The conditions were perfect. I'd never enjoyed such an undisturbed, open-ended opportunity until then, and never since. I investigated my body-sensations, thoughts, emotions, moods, dreams and biological

¹ 'Satipatthana' is the word conventionally used to describe the training discipline of the *Sutta*. This discipline has four parts, which are themselves called 'satipatthanas'. These involve systematically focusing on the body, emotions, states of mind and thoughts.

rhythms for weeks at a time. I did this while sitting, walking, standing and lying down, and in all the activities in between.

Through weeks of bodyscanning I gradually became transparent to myself. I illuminated every part of my body from the inside. I 'saw' and felt everything about the muscles, bones, organs and physiology that it was humanly possible to feel. I directed that same sharp quality of vision towards my mental activity, as the Buddha recommends in the *Sutta*. I certainly didn't need any external stimulus to stay interested. Silence, stillness and time were quite enough. The inner movies never stopped. The drama was all there within my skin and the surprises kept coming.

So what did I find out? As a writer, I don't feel comfortable with the confessional mode, but I can say a few things. Firstly, it seems that I am a very interesting fellow. Seven months of looking in the mirror, and it was not boring for a moment. I was delighted, irritated, astonished and disgusted, but never bored. At that time (and *never* since), my mind had a powerful instinct to go further and further back into the past. I recovered an immense store of memories that I thought I had lost forever. I'm sure some of them were fictions, but since I was also exploring my mind's imaginative capacities, this hardly mattered. The many sublime and ecstatic states that occurred over those months were superior to anything I'd known from LSD days, which is saying a great deal. The insights into myself and the world came in the hundreds.

I believe the retreat cured forever any tendency I might have had towards depression, which is always a risk for a loner and an introvert. I also had minutes and hours, but never more than a day, of what seemed to be pure insanity, except that I always recovered more cheerful than before. I felt confident with the process. I developed something akin to religious faith in the intelligence of the mind itself. I felt as if I was in good hands, even if I didn't know whose hands they were.

Over the seven months, I got to see my mind's complete library, repertoire of stories and bags of tricks in unimaginable detail. The luxury of this retreat was that I had ample time to see and appraise literally everything that made up 'me', down to the most fleeting emotions and assumptions. I came to know who I was and what I felt, at least in that moment.² I discovered which ideas and emotions were natural to me, and

² This sense of 'seeing who I really was' was of course an illusion, but an understandable one. Seeing myself more accurately is not the same as seeing the whole package, even if it sometimes felt that way. It was also obvious that 'who I am', is forever fluid and changing according to inner and outer forces. The Buddha was at least partly right on this score.

which were cultural viruses. This gave me the grounding to deal intelligently with my biggest issue which was: 'What am I going to do with my life?'

I remained throughout a keen follower of the Buddha's method in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. There is a beautiful phrase in the literature. *Ehipassiko* means, 'Come and try it out for yourself' (and you will see that this teaching is true). It implies that if you do the practice and develop a strong, calm, insightful mind, you will see the world just as the Buddha did.

I did what he recommended. I developed that trustworthy state of mind but when I looked at the world, I found that the Buddha had got it wrong. He said his truth was universal for all, but it turned out to be only *his* truth. It certainly wasn't mine. He saw life as nothing but suffering, misery and ugliness. I couldn't for the life of me understand what he was complaining about. Meditating just made the world more beautiful for me. I knew that was never going to change and it never has.

I ended the retreat only because the snow arrived. My hut was not insulated and had no heating. After several freezing days wearing all the clothing I owned, including my sleeping bag, I realised that I had no choice but to leave. I felt somewhat half-cooked, and I promised myself another seven months sometime, but it hasn't happened yet.

That retreat was the turning point in my life. Prior to that, I had spent three years in Asia. I had also spent eight years living the back-to-the-land lifestyle, complete with gardens, orchards, beehives, a hand-made house and like-minded neighbours. After the retreat, the limitations of that rustic idyll were nakedly obvious. Nor was I ever going to take the logical next step and become a monk. Isolation from society, playing Thoreau, and navel-gazing could take me only so far, and I knew I'd gone far enough. Freud said 'love and work are the cornerstones of our humanity', and I knew I was lacking in both. So I came to Australia and opened up the Perth Meditation Centre. I've been teaching and writing ever since.

I was apprehensive when I left the retreat. My state of mind felt superb, but could it only exist within the nursery of a retreat? Was it like a plant reliant on a precise biological niche? Would it survive the plunge back into the barbaric world of money, work, sexual relationships, information overload and the seas of faceless humanity?

My fears were justified. As I expected, it was even tougher than I could imagine. My life had been peaceful but intellectually poor for many years. I could see that a rich quality of life comes with a price. If I couldn't

usefully meditate after a row with a girlfriend or during another financial emergency, there wasn't much point in it. I didn't want meditation to become just a hobby, or an escape, or a way to relax, or a nostalgic memory of earlier, carefree times.

Open Monitoring

Fortunately, my main practice was Satipatthana, which is of course the subject of this entire book. On retreat, I trained myself to become mindful of – to 'hold in mind' and evaluate – every thought, sensation, emotion, mood, quality of mind, memory, dream-image and intuition as they occurred. This is the full development of the Satipatthana method, and it doesn't require isolation or long sitting meditations. Satipatthana could adjust to post-retreat life in a way that the Tibetan practices couldn't.

A meditation similar to Satipatthana, and easier to understand, is what psychologists call 'Open Monitoring' (OM). Done systematically, OM is still based on a normal breath or bodyscan practice. It is essentially just a shift in emphasis from a 'closed' focus on the body towards an 'open' monitoring of the peripheral thoughts, sensations and moods. When doing OM, we still focus on the body but we give ourselves more licence to notice what else is in consciousness at the same time. We don't need to actively search for anything. We just wait for the next thing to arise, for the next item to float down the Stream of Consciousness. Many writers regard OM as the best way of describing Psychological Mindfulness (PM) as a meditation practice.

There are a variety of OM techniques in the literature. The Indian anti-guru Krishnamurti promoted the concept of 'Choiceless Awareness'. He described this as an ego-free, non-discriminating, effortless, 'observing without an observer', state of mind. On retreat, I also did the advanced Tibetan practice called 'Dzogchen' or 'Mahamudra'. This recommends a 50-50 split between the focusing and monitoring functions, and I suspect that this is ideal.³

PM is sympathetic to both Dzogchen and Choiceless Awareness and uses their terminology. All three are simpler than the Buddha's approach but the family resemblance is obvious. They all have the same open-ended, all-inclusive quality. A defining characteristic of an OM meditation

³ Tibetan Buddhism has a mythology that Mind is 'intrinsically pure, luminous and empty' and that thoughts and perceptions defile this purity. This concept of original 'Buddhamind' (*bodhicitta*) correlates well with the way that Kabat-Zinn uses the terms 'awareness' and 'mindfulness'.

is that you don't pre-select what you will pay attention to. While remaining consciously grounded in the body, you give your free attention to whatever else arises in the moment.

PM, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism commonly posit a simple duality of body and mind. They assume that there can be a pure observer consciousness that is separate from what it sees: that 'mind' can be separated from the contents of the mind. PM tends to idealise this non-reactive, 'just watching', 'empty' state of mind. *Unlike* Satipatthana, PM also minimises the value of deliberate attention. Once you feel settled, you are encouraged to let go into a free-floating, 'open' state of choiceless awareness. Many writers now seem to regard this passive, nonjudgmental acceptance of present-moment experience as what mindfulness 'really' is.

But is it actually possible to attain a dispassionate, 'just watching' state of mind? That was certainly not my experience on retreat, and I doubt if any meditator attains anything that resembles it for long. In science, the idea of unbiased observation is regarded as a cognitive fallacy. The observer always interacts in often mysterious ways with the observed. He has his goals, hopes, expectations and prior knowledge, and these invariably shape what he sees. Even the simplest perception is inextricably coded with memory-based understanding. Scientists, with the help of elaborate protocols, work extremely hard to minimise this effect but they never expect to eradicate it completely. This subtle, continuous interaction of subject and object is also going on when we meditate.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will find that when doing OM, the 'Watching Mind' doesn't 'just watch.' It is subtly selective and discriminating. It is not pure and impersonal like a mirror (which is a common metaphor) reflecting things 'just as they are'. It always gravitates towards what is most interesting or salient, as it should. It is not passive or disengaged (like a mountain). We can't dismiss or 'just watch' everything indiscriminately (like objects floating downstream). Life is too important to let it all drift past unnoticed.

Nor can we revert to seeing things innocently the way a child is assumed to do ('Beginner's Mind'). We know too much. We can see things *differently*, and in more detail, but we can't go back to scratch. The 'Watching Mind' is not a kind of 'Bare Attention' or primordial consciousness cut free from cognition, memory and emotion. No matter how refined and detailed our perception of something is, it will always have associations and filters unique to us. We are also likely to have well-embedded ideological preferences. PM and Zen, for example,

automatically give high value to arising sensations and low value to arising thought. They also preference the state of mind over the phenomena passing through it.

So why try to do Open Monitoring at all? It turns out that what does happen is very useful indeed. Even when we apparently ‘just watch’, we invariably reappraise and reorient ourselves towards each object. We engage and ‘process’ each thing we notice, if only to a tiny degree, through lightning-fast feedback systems. (‘Is this really what it seems to be? How important is it really?’) Even if we abandon it in a millisecond, which is the fate of most stimuli, we still evaluate it first. This evaluation is mostly automatic and effortless but it can’t be avoided. If we are alert, we are likely to be aware of it happening dozens of times each minute.

OM makes this natural process more conscious and therefore more accurate. It slows down the video to catch the detail. OM means holding and reappraising any interesting stimulus for a few seconds longer than usual. A well-controlled mind can easily do this without losing its primary focus on the body. This enables us to grasp that arising object and ‘know’ it more precisely than before.

Nor does monitoring involve only thoughts. We ‘reframe’ many other kinds of stimuli to put them in their broader perspective. We recognise a subtle overreaction or bad mood, and it starts to dissolve. We notice a tension in our back, and realign our posture. We realise that we are holding on to a grudge, or are worrying about something unnecessarily, and the problem starts to shift. OM scales whatever we notice up or down in value, and doing this more consciously can vastly improve the outcomes.

Most of these fine reappraisals are done within a few seconds or less. This isn’t long enough to lead us into open-ended ‘elaborative’ thought.⁴ If we are well-grounded in the body, a brief examination of something else is not long enough to break that anchor. These reappraisals are likely to be small but there may be hundreds of them. Open Monitoring brings those homeostatic adjustments closer to the surface. This is one reason why we mysteriously feel so much better as we meditate.

Meditation almost always involves both *focusing* (on the body, for example) and *monitoring* (the periphery, the ‘not-body’), but we can

⁴ As a rule, we can say that a stimulus only becomes a ‘distraction’ when we have spent 10-20 seconds on it. If we are well grounded in the body, a brief examination of something else is not long enough to break that anchor. Furthermore, the final part of Satipatthana encourages a deliberate split of attention on both the body and a thought simultaneously.

choose how we distribute our metabolic resources between these two functions. New meditators have to give most emphasis to the focusing function, and at first they may not even have a clue about monitoring. OM is usually regarded in the traditional literature as an advanced practice to be done only after good body-mind stillness is established.

Good *focusing* brings enormous benefits. These include relaxation (optimal muscle tone and arousal), balance, comfort, pleasure and mental control. Once a meditator has attained good body-mind stillness (*passaddhi*), he can maintain this with a more routine level of focus. This gives him more freedom to deliberately *monitor* what else is happening in his mind without getting lost in thought.

OM is a tolerant and welcoming practice. In theory, nothing is excluded. In theory at least, nothing is a distraction if it can be appropriately held in mind. Without good body focus however, an OM meditation can easily degenerate into little more than randomly thinking about whatever comes to mind. If the body is not genuinely still, the mind can easily wander everywhere. Trying to 'Watch the Stream of Consciousness' without mental calm can actually *increase* the amount of time that meditators spend thinking about themselves each day. It can *amplify* rather than reduce their tendency to ruminate.

To focus and evaluate

Satipatthana can be regarded as an Open Monitoring practice but it is more sharp-edged than this. *Sati*, the word we translate as 'mindfulness', literally means 'to focus on and evaluate' something. Whenever we pay attention to anything at all, we do so for extra clarity of vision and a clearer understanding⁵. We want to know more about it to inform our response. This dynamic of perception + evaluation + response applies equally to the hundreds of stimuli that we notice coming and going in an Open Monitoring meditation.

To be mindful means: to hold something in mind; to hold it still, without elaboration; and to hold it as a 'clear and distinct image' (or 'mental representation'). This feeling of holding something in the spotlight, and holding it separate from everything else, is quite unmistakable once you get it. Something 'clicks' into place. You feel face-

⁵ The Pali term for 'clarity of vision and understanding' is *sampajjana*. This is so intimately connected with conscious perception (*sati*) that they are frequently linked into a phrase: *sati-sampajjana*. See Chapter 13.

to-face with the object. This feeling is often accompanied by a remarkable sense of stillness, lightness and space in the body.

Here is another way of describing this. The body is calm and still. The mind feels like a clear, open space in front of you, and the object hangs in the centre of that space. (Alternatively, your body itself can seem like that open space). This state of mind is often called 'Emptiness', but this is a misleading term with religious and ideological overtones. I think it is best to regard emptiness as little more than an adjective or a metaphor for a particular uncluttered quality of mind.

The full practice of Satipatthana means being able to see *all* the contents of consciousness with this kind of clarity. The Buddha suggested we approach this task systematically. Once body-mind stillness has been established, he said we should train ourselves to notice individual thoughts; states of mind; valences (the positive or negative affective charges of stimuli); emotions and the continuous flux of body sensations.

This is the quiet but deliberate play of consciousness that is characteristic of insight meditation. On my long retreat, I started by investigating the infinity of inner and outer sensations. I then naturally moved on to explore finer and finer gradations of feeling and mood – the background weather of the body-mind.

Some of these were anchored to memories or images, while others arrived for no apparent reason at all. I also spent hours exploring the hypnagogic dream world between waking and sleep. Time became elastic, both contracting and expanding. Most of this inner drama was quiet, delicate and miniaturised. It was in water colours not oils. It was like Beethoven played on a clavichord rather than a concert grand.

Although I often lost the plot, fell asleep and fell down rabbit-holes of thought, the feeling of being truly mindful – fully focused and aware of something – was quite unmistakable. No matter how peculiar, subtle, gross, fleeting, massive or minute a particular mental object might be, the feeling of clear perception was always much the same. It seemed to be grounded in a particularly stable physiological state. This sense of lucid perception, of having a mind state as clear and accurate as possible, was perhaps the most valuable discovery I made on that retreat.

But where do you stop? I could easily have accumulated terabytes of information about my inner world but to what purpose? There is no end to the amassing of information. A scientist can easily spend a lifetime investigating aquatic snails or arctic lichen. Darwin spent eight years on

barnacles, but like any scientist he did so in a highly discriminating fashion.

To be mindful means ‘to consciously perceive and *evaluate*’ something. We see the true worth of anything in relation to our larger goals. We always have to judge, and we do this so automatically that we rarely notice it happening. Attention is the currency, the hard cash of the brain. When we become mindful of something, we automatically evaluate it: how much longer shall I stay with this? How much attention does this deserve? This attribution of value is even quantifiable and fungible. You may give one object five seconds and another ten seconds. This means that you see one object as being twice as valuable as the other.

In an OM meditation, we notice one stimulus after another, and we have to decide how long to stay with each one. If we are mentally dull, we will just drift. We get bored with one thing and somehow drift towards something else. This is our normal state of automatic, low-quality, impulse-led judgement: not this, not that, maybe this, try out that, until it is time to finish. This incoherent drifting is always a danger with OM.

Satipatthana should have a brighter and more purposeful mental quality. When something arises, we orient towards it until it clicks into place (*sati*). We see it in more detail, with clarity and understanding (*sampajjana*). At this point the judgement is usually clear: let it go (low value) or give it a few more seconds (higher value). Even if we abandon it quickly, it has still been slightly ‘processed’ as cognitive psychologists would say. We have understood it a little more clearly, and it goes back into the cerebral database more differentiated than before.

This is how I understood the process on my long retreat. I had reduced the stimuli from the outer world to an absolute minimum for those seven months. This enabled my inner activity to emerge in all its ragged glory. My brain slowed down so much that I could stop, hold and come to know tens of thousands of individual stimuli, one by one. It was like an exceptionally detailed spring cleaning, room by room, shelf by shelf, corner by corner, of a mansion the size of Gormenghast.

Learning how to usefully direct my attention at the microscopic level was very valuable, but it wasn’t quite enough in itself. I still had to make the macroscopic decisions: How would I make a living? Should I become a monk? Was I going to stay with my girlfriend or not? These higher order deliberations are also part of the Satipatthana method but they go beyond Open Monitoring. I’ll explain how that kind of advanced thought works in Chapter 19.