Introduction

Meditation is a simple skill. Having a teacher can help, but meditators often figure it out for themselves. I had taught myself to meditate while still a teenager, but in 1975 I stumbled on a remarkable 2500-year-old text. This was the *Satipatthana Sutta,* usually translated as *The Foundations of Mindfulness.* The word *sati* means 'mindfulness' and the word *sutta* means 'text' or 'discourse'. From now on I'll refer to this text simply as the *Sutta.*

This text is the Buddha's original DIY, 'How to Meditate and be Mindful' manual. If a Buddhist knows any original text it is likely to be the *Sutta.* It consists of 21 exercises and provides the authority for the popular 10-day Burmese-style 'Vipassana' retreats. These retreats in turn were the direct inspiration for the use of mindfulness in psychology.

The *Sutta* is only a few pages long. Its great virtue is that it is more about meditation practice than Buddhist dogma. Back in 1975 I was so impressed that I memorised it. It gave a clear shape to my existing practice and mapped out possibilities I'd never imagined. The *Sutta* has been my touchstone ever since.

Soon afterwards I attended my first 10-day retreat, led by a young and enthusiastic ex-monk, Christopher Titmuss. At 10.30 am on the third day I had an epiphany. I knew with absolute certainty that my life would revolve around meditation, and so it turned out. Over the next decade I spent a total of 18 months doing Vipassana, Tibetan, Zen and Yoga retreats.

In 1987 I opened the Perth Meditation Centre and was soon teaching a thousand people each year. From the start, the *Sutta* helped me avoid several pitfalls. For example, most people regard it as self-evident that to meditate we have to sit still with our eyes closed. However, the Buddha said that this is just the starting point. In fact, he regarded sitting meditation as nothing more than the *first* part of the *first* of the four 'foundations' of mindfulness.

In the *Sutta* the Buddha explains how to meditate while sitting, walking, standing and lying down, and how to expand this capacity for self-observation into all daily activities. Over my years of teaching, I developed a repertoire of what I called 'spot-meditations' based on this versatile approach. The *Sutta* was the inspiration for what became the 42 exercises in my book *The 5-Minute Meditator.*

Teaching meditation became my full-time career, and I've written five books on the subject, but I never had any appetite for Buddhism itself. As a sceptical, post-Enlightenment Westerner, I deeply dislike its monastic, world-denying values and its reliance on karma and reincarnation to explain suffering. Conversely, I found popular Buddhism too sentimental and intellectually shallow to take seriously. As a meditation teacher, I made it quite clear that my values were *not* Buddhist, *not* Yogic, *not* New Age and *not* spiritual. When people ask about my values, I usually say that I am a 'critical thinker'.

Fortunately in the *Sutta* it is remarkably easy to distinguish meditation practice from Buddhist dogma. Buddhism is not meditation. Meditation is not Buddhism. We don't have to buy the Buddhist package, or any part of it, to meditate. We can easily extract the Buddha's technical instructions from the *Sutta,* and use them for our own purposes. This is what I did when I started teaching. I selected what I found useful for my students and myself, and gradually abandoned the rest.

For most of my peers however, the relationship between meditation and Buddhism remained problematic. In 1994 I attended a 4-day conference of 150 Western meditation teachers in San Francisco, hosted by Jack Kornfield. Most of us were non-celibate, unaffiliated teachers who had studied in Buddhist settings. We discussed the vexed question of how we could conscientiously integrate the Asian monastic tradition with the demands and values of Western civilisation. (Simple answer: you can't. They are antagonistic.)

En route to the conference, I shared the bus with a molecular biologist from Massachusetts called Jon Kabat-Zinn (Remember this name). We had an exciting conversation about the above, and his parting words to me were: 'Don't give up on meditation just because the Buddhists are crazy!' I certainly gave up on Buddhism, but Jon Kabat-Zinn proved to be more imaginative than me. He had already found a fruitful way to work with those crazy Buddhists.

Over the following years I pursued my own studies in psychology and science, and hoped for the time when meditation could be regarded as scientifically respectable. Two more big conferences and a decade later, I despaired that this would ever happen in my lifetime. My peers clearly found far more of value in Buddhism than I did, and were happy to identify with it. As a meditation teacher who was trying to be as rational and non-mystical as possible, I felt very isolated.

Then, around 2005, the situation started to change. The most telling sign was a change of name. As a teacher, I get phone calls every week from prospective students. Many callers used to say, 'My psychologist (or doctor) has told me to learn meditation.' Now they were saying, 'My psychologist has told me to learn *mindfulness*.' The technique hadn't changed, but 'meditation' had mysteriously morphed into 'mindfulness.' How did this happen?

The explanation starts with the *Sutta.* Early last century in Burma, there was a revival of meditation practice which drew its methodology directly from the *Sutta.* As a *lay,* not monastic, movement it had no precedent in Buddhist history. Its leader, the charismatic politician U Ba Khin, established the International Meditation Centre (IMC) in 1952 and authorised both lay men *and women* and Westerners as teachers. This secular movement was reinforced by the great reformer monk Mahasi Sayadaw, who was also an enthusiastic teacher of lay people.

IMC established the pattern of 10-day 'Vipassana' retreats that have since swept the Western world. Because it described the practice as 'just meditation, not Buddhism', it wasn't long before many Westerners including myself were leading 10-day retreats for purposes far removed from the original Buddhist goals.

One of these new purposes is pain management. In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn faithfully adapted the format of a 10-day Vipassana retreat into an 8-week program that he called 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' (MBSR). Originally designed for people in chronic pain, it was soon adapted for broader psychological use. Other therapies had independently promoted mindfulness but MBSR, as a single method technique, quickly became the market leader.

Mindfulness seemed to work. The research followed. Educators, sportspeople, the self-help industry and the military took it up. The wave of interest became a tsunami. In the popular press, 'mindfulness' as a label has now largely trumped 'meditation.' So is it just a fashion-driven change of name or is there a genuine difference? When I ask my students why they want to learn, they typically say, 'I'm too anxious. I can't stop thinking and I have trouble sleeping.'

Meditation can be ideal for them. This involves two skills. The first is learning to relax quickly and consciously. The second is learning to pay attention, and so control runaway thought. Meditation is a perfect way to learn relaxation and attention at the same time. Focusing on the body relaxes it, and the act of focusing controls thought and calms the mind.

As a sit-down practice, mindfulness and meditation are identical. No beginner could make any distinction between them. Same rootstock. Same benefits. Same skills: relaxation and attention. Very few people and very few therapies go beyond this point, and perhaps they don't need to. The benefits of this alone can be life-changing. So does it matter that psychologists now call this technique 'mindfulness' rather than 'meditation'?

It does. Names really do matter. 'Mindfulness' and 'meditation' are not naked, stand-alone concepts. 'Meditation' comes from monastic traditions based on withdrawal from the world. It is related to Buddhism, Yoga, spirituality and New Age ideas, and it is explained in those terms. Anyone who attends a course or reads a book about meditation will encounter those embedded values within minutes. The implication is that anyone who is seriously interested will need to explore that spiritual hinterland. 'Mindfulness' on the other hand is more clearly related to psychology, scientific research and rational thought. Its approach is more about Stoic acceptance than monastic withdrawal. It is about coping better in the world rather than escaping from it.

I am delighted that psychologists have now extracted this practice from the stranglehold of Eastern spirituality. Equally important is the fact that people are at last *discussing* mindfulness. No one ever talked seriously about meditation. As a result, 'mindfulness' has a practical orientation and a descriptive language that 'meditation' has always lacked.

And yet mindfulness itself has its problems. Buddhists, psychologists and popular writers all proclaim their exclusive understanding of it. Ignorance of the past and half-truths are endemic. Poor quality research and extravagant promotional claims muddy the waters. The field is balkanising into sub-disciplines, and dissolving into the swamp of the self-help literature. Nor does it help in the search for scientific respect that many writers still profess an uncritical admiration for Buddhism.

If you feel confused by all this, please realise that you are not alone. 35 years after Jon Kabat-Zinn launched his seminal program, there is still no consensus on what mindfulness actually is or how it works. In 2012, David Vago summed up what he called, 'the major problem in the field right now': 'There remains no single "correct" or "authoritative definition" of mindfulness and the concept is often trivialised and conflated with many common interpretations.'[1] It is not surprising that two recent meta-analyses of the scientific literature conclude that nearly all the research is of poor quality.[2] Mindfulness is popular but it still lacks scientific credibility. Why is this?

Aristotle, who established more scientific disciplines than any other man in history, said that a science has to start with a clear axiomatic definition free of ambiguities. We find nothing like this when we look at mindfulness. The word 'mindfulness' is a conglomeration of disparate meanings. It is variously used to describe a meditation practice; a cognitive function (attention); a psychotherapy; an ideal state of mind (serenity or 'emptiness'); a way of life and the essence of Buddhism itself.

'Mindfulness' no longer has any single meaning that could form the basis of a scientific discipline. Throughout this book, I will refer to this bundle as 'Psychological Mindfulness' (PM). For ease of use, I will define PM as 'a state of nonjudgmental acceptance'.

Strange to say, 'to be mindful' in common usage is *not* a confusing term. It has been doing good service in the English language since the 14th Century. 'To be mindful' means: 'to pay attention to what you are doing to avoid mistakes or improve performance.' This straightforward meaning is also compatible with the way the Buddha uses the term.

There is no dispute that the *Sutta* is the source of Vipassana, of MBSR and of Psychological Mindfulness. Nor is there any dispute that 'mindfulness' is the standard translation of *sati.* Yet although most popular writers claim some authority from the Buddha, they never seem to check what he actually said about the subject. In the *Sutta,* the Buddha builds a systematic four-stage training program on the concept of *sati* in a way that would certainly have impressed Aristotle. Its language is plain and direct. The terms are clearly defined. Its methodology and goals are obvious. So how did its descendant, Psychological Mindfulness, become so confusing?

In 1881, T.W. Rhys Davids translated *sati* as 'mindfulness'. This was a poor translation for reasons I will explain later, but we are now stuck with it. It is quite obvious from the *Sutta* that *sati* actually means 'attention.' To be more precise, *sati* means the kind of purposeful attention that can discriminate good and bad, right or wrong, useful and useless in any situation. This is in fact the primary reason we pay attention to anything: we focus in order to sharpen our perception and judgement of something prior to a response. In the Buddhist texts, the term *sati* includes this the evaluative aspect even more strongly than does our English word 'attention'. *Sati* means 'attention', but we can define it more accurately as: 'the clear perception and evaluation of something.'

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[1] David Vago. 2012.

[2] See Chapter 24 for the current state of the research.

By now you may have noticed a contradiction. *Sati* as 'attention' is almost the *opposite* of the PM definition as 'a state of nonjudgmental acceptance.' This clash of definitions can be resolved if we understand that they refer to entirely different things. *Sati* as 'attention' describes a mental *function*. Paying attention is something that we do all day long, automatically or consciously, in every activity. PM, on the other hand, describes an ideal meditative *state of mind*. 'Nonjudgmental acceptance' can only occur with any purity when we are meditating or not obliged to act. Its field of operation is much narrower than attention itself.

These two meanings are not incompatible but they are certainly not the same. A mental function is not an ideal meditative state of mind. Paying attention to optimise a response is not the same as nonjudgementally accepting whatever happens. There is a place for both concepts within the mindfulness field, but it doesn't help to conflate them. If I have one major goal in writing this book, it is to rehabilitate the role of attention and good judgement in the field of mindfulness.

The title of this book, 'The Foundations of Mindfulness' happens to be the common, if slightly inaccurate, translation of the *Satipatthana Sutta.* This entire book is my commentary on this text. I will also use the word 'foundation' in two other ways. I describe how the *Sutta,* despite its antiquity, can still be an excellent foundation for a systematic, mind-training discipline based on meditation. It has certainly been the foundation for my own practice since 1975. It has also served as the foundational manual for my career as a meditation teacher since 1987. Finally I will explain how the *Sutta* is the somewhat neglected 'foundation' for Psychological Mindfulness.

The *Sutta* itself consists of four sections. These are: Mindfulness of the Body; Mindfulness of Emotion; Mindfulness of States of Mind; and Mindfulness of Thought. These are the four 'foundations' or 'training disciplines' or 'contemplations' that make up the *Sutta,* and this book loosely follows this structure.

The first 10 chapters of this book describe basic meditation practice. These correspond to the huge 'Mindfulness of the Body' section that opens the *Sutta*. For readers who regard mindfulness and meditation as being more or less identical, and who have little interest in the Buddhist sources, this will be quite sufficient. While I have kept the references to the *Sutta* to a minimum in these chapters, I can assure you that my explanations are all compatible with the Buddha's original instructions.

Part Two of this book is the graduate level. In Chapters 11-20, I present my translation of the *Sutta* and outline its argument. I analyse the Buddha's key term *sati* and explain how he applied it. Finally, I elaborate on the training disciplines relating to the other three 'foundations' of the *Sutta*, namely Mindfulness of Emotion, of States of Mind and of Thought.

Part Three of the book from Chapter 21 onwards explores the new approach and descriptive language that Psychological Mindfulness has brought to the subject. It also looks at how mindfulness seems to work as a therapy and the state of the science.

One critic said that reading books on mindfulness is like 'wading through mud' and I agree. I will try to bring more descriptive clarity to the subject. At the risk of appearing pedantic, I will repeatedly define terms, highlight contradictions and try to decipher the cliches. Nor will I try to pretend that everything Buddhist is automatically benign. I believe it shows him far more respect as a thinking human being to accurately present his doctrines rather than airbrush him for modern sensibilities.

In particular, I will try to make a distinction that can be quite hard to grasp. Most Westerners have a fairly coherent idea of the Buddha built up from years of exposure to the media, if nothing else. I will refer to this concept as the 'popular' Buddha or the 'mythical' Buddha. Most people unthinkingly assume that their image of the Buddha is reasonably consonant with the 'real' Buddha. They are usually well off the mark.

When I talk about the 'Buddha' however, I refer to the *historical* Buddha, not the popular one. Even though we have a colossal amount of biographical literature available, few Westerners know much about him. He was a real man. We know what he said. We have tens of thousands of words attributed to him. He was not at all as sympathetic as the popular Buddha of the media. He hardly ever mentioned 'compassion'. (That is more of a Tibetan theme.) He was an diehard ascetic who regarded all sensual pleasures and worldly pursuits as antagonistic to inner peace. The historical Buddha was nothing like our popular conception of him.

Similarly, most Westerners will feel that they have a reasonably accurate idea of Buddhism itself. We can regard this concept as 'Western Buddhism' or 'Modern Buddhism.' This is typically a mixture of all forms of Buddhism along with whatever Christian, Stoic, liberal, New Age, psychological and spiritual values seem compatible with it.

When I talk about Buddhism however, I will refer only to what the historical Buddha originally taught. This is vastly different from Western Buddhism. It is even distinct from Tibetan or Zen Buddhism, much of which has no recognisable relationship to his original teaching. I imagine it is also remote from modern Asian Buddhism, about which I know almost nothing.

The historical Buddha's doctrines are found in the colossal body of original Pali language texts known as 'The Pali Canon.' This contains more than 3000 of the Buddha's sermons, so we really do know what he said. The Pali Canon is the basis for the kind of Buddhism found in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia. This school of Buddhism is called the 'Theravada' (adjective: 'Theravadin'), and it is the closest to what the Buddha actually taught. Any beliefs and opinions that I attribute to the historical Buddha can be readily corroborated by the Pali Canon.

Part of the reasons for the success of Psychological Mindfulness is its claim to be 'scientific' rather than 'spiritual'. In fact, it has more Buddhist allegiances than it usually admits to. Paradoxically these relate not to the *Sutta,* but to a much later manifestation, namely Zen. The founder of the Japanese school of Soto Zen is Dogen (1200-1253). Above all else, he promoted the single-minded practice of seated meditation called *Shikantaza.* This literally translates as 'Just Sitting' (and 'Not-thinking').

Dogen was a prolific writer and an uncompromising mystic. He regarded all thought, effort, discrimination, and even the entire Buddhist tradition itself, as entirely subordinate to the practice of 'Just Sitting'. This means that Dogen, rather than the Buddha, is the doctrinal source for the PM emphasis on unfocused, thought-free sitting, along with a nonjudgmental acceptance of whatever happens, and an passive 'openness' to experience. I periodically quote from Dogen's essays to explain the kind of values that lie behind PM.

Dogen's school of Zen is a half-way house between the asceticism of the Buddha and the more indulgent meditation practices of today. As a late reform movement in Buddhism, it downplays ideas that many Westerners find objectionable, such as suffering, renunciation, karma and reincarnation. Modern mindfulness really can claim some Buddhist descent, but it derives from a stripped-down, 'Be Here Now' form of Buddhism that is more acceptable to Westerners than the original.

Both Buddhism and psychology have their strengths and limitations and I will try to point them out in this book. The Buddha's approach is logical, coherent and wide-ranging, but it is oriented towards world-denying, monastic values that are now beyond resuscitation in the West. In contrast, the psychological approach is logically confused, but its pragmatic methods are helping to vastly improve people's lives.

Above all, 'mindfulness' in its modern form has more potential than 'meditation' ever did. We can be very grateful to Kabat-Zinn and to those other early writers and psychologists who managed to import meditation into the mainstream of Western culture. 'Mindfulness' can embrace the whole field of self-observation, self-improvement and our messy ordinary lives in a way that 'meditation' (as 'time out') never could.

While writing this book, I have kept several prospective readers in mind. Although this is not a self-help book, it does contain many spin-off exercises that a novice can try out immediately. If you are relatively new to meditation, I hope you find them useful. Part One of this book – the first ten chapters – are particularly for you.

I've also considered the keen meditator who feels bamboozled by the mindfulness literature; the young psychologist who wishes she could make more sense of it all; the researchers who are struggling to define the phenomena; and the Western Buddhist who has not yet tackled the *Sutta.* I hope I can offer something of value to each of you.

Finally, I could not have written this book without the help of many others. I am indebted to the psychiatrists and psychologists who have generously shared their knowledge and resources with me. I would particularly like to thank Mark Craigie, Kate James and Jane Genovese in this respect. My thanks are also due to my friend, colleague and researcher, Paul Majewski, who has shaped this book in more ways than he can imagine.

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