

# LEARN HOW TO PRACTISE MINDFULNESS

Vicente Simón

con la colaboración de Christopher Germer

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**P**erhaps the best way of starting this review is with the words by the author himself, Vicente Simón, "this book was born with the fervent desire of providing a practical and simple guide for all the people who are looking for their way in this changing labyrinth in constant crisis in which we were destined to live. Meditation (*mindfulness*), a practice probably as ancient as humanity, is perhaps the great path that can lead us to the center of ourselves, the only place where peace reigns and mystery lives. Only by quieting the mind is it possible to find the way out of the labyrinth....". Both Dr. Germer, coauthor of chapter 5, and I hope that this book contributes to promoting the profound comprehension of reality, the transformation of consciousness and the extension of wellbeing, love and peace to all human beings" (pp. 15-16).

The most adequate summary is made in the prologue by Ramón Bayés, "The book is structured in several parts: it begins with the definition ("*calming the mind to see with clarity*") and the material requirements necessary for meditation. It continues with clear instructions on the attitude with which one must begin to practice it (*Whatever appears in your mind, simply observe it*) and a detailed description of the necessary instructions for carrying out meditation exercises (breathing, emotions, self-compassion, space and light), indicating how to train oneself to overcome the obstacles that might be encountered. Each chapter ends with a brief questionnaire that allows us to evaluate the progress made. A reference section and a useful alphabetical index", complete the work (p.7). The socio-philosophical contributions made by Ramón Bayés – maestro - on so many topics for so many generations of psychologists would be the object of another review. An

example of this could be the association he makes between *mindfulness* and the thoughts of Saint Augustine, who said that there were not three times: past, present and future, but rather that man could only rely on the present of present things, the present of past things and the present of future things; in other words, on the here and now which *mindfulness* talks about (p.8).

The book consists of seven chapters that include: thoughts of a relevant author regarding the topic at hand, an index of what is going to be dealt with, theoretical developments that are being carried out, long and abbreviated versions of the same meditation and a chapter self-evaluation. The following sequence is recommended for immersion into each chapter: index, self-evaluation questions, theoretical text, practical text (exercises and proposed meditations) and the cited questions, for assessing how far we came with our immersion (p. 19).

## WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY MINDFULNESS

*Mindfulness* is an English term used to translate the Pali term "sati" which denotes awareness, attention and memory (Siegel et al. 2009). The most frequent translations to our language are those of "full attention" and "full consciousness". But the author, faced with the semantic transformation that the term is experiencing, in function of the context in which it is employed, makes five decisions:

- 1) To employ the English term (*Mindfulness*) without the restricted translations (Full attention or Full consciousness).
- 2) To follow the three meanings Germer (2005) gives to the term so that the reader can infer in each case whether it is a theoretical construct, practice for developing *mindfulness* (such as meditation) or a psychological process (to be aware - mindful).
- 3) To distinguish the most adequate term in scientific and

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academic contexts (*Mindfulness*) - a very restricted term for which an operational definition can be given in each investigation - and in everyday and practical (meditation) contexts, where it can refer to a great variety of very diverse practices which may not, and do not have to, have a defined objective, these objectives often being subjective and diffuse.

- 4) To opt in the book for the term "meditation", as it is a book to help in the learning of meditation, and reserve *Mindfulness* for when he makes reference to more theoretical and research-related contents.
- 5) To specify, after analyzing several definitions, the three things that *mindfulness* means in a therapeutic context: a) awareness, b) of present experience, c) with acceptance (Germer, 2005).

***Effects of meditation: changes in state (temporal) vs. trait changes (disposition, attitude and aptitude or permanent state)***

The fifth decision allows the author to respond to the view of the practice of mindfulness (meditation) as a process that usually leads to long-lasting and important changes in people. The experience of meditation consists of entering into a peculiar state of mind (said entrance is instantaneous) and holding it for a certain period of time. Neurobiological research has shown that "state" changes are transformed into "trait" changes, according to Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007.

***Monkey mind, narrative mind, wandering mind, and pondering mind***

The previous approach leads V. Simón to define meditation as a process that is extended in time, a definition that can be expressed, the author tells us, as what meditation intends is to "*calm the mind in order to see with clarity*" (p.29). We must calm our mind because it is usually agitated in an almost constant internal dialogue, returning to and ruminating on the same ideas again and again; this mind is usually what is known as "monkey mind", "narrative mind", "wandering mind", and what our author calls the "pondering mind", not achieving solutions or resolving the problem, that is, behaving as the "working mind" in words of Balsekar, 2007. There is scientific evidence that these two types of minds correspond to two types of differentiated brain activity (Cfr. V. Simón, 2011, p. 29).

The *pondering mind* operates when we are not in the here and now (*Mindfulness*); it is the mind that deals and

is preoccupied with the past (ruminating and immersing oneself into obsessive and depressive states) and the future (anticipating inexistent realities that lead us to anxiety states). Thus, the pondering mind is a type of mind that hinders living; this happens only in the present. "Calming the mind" assumes leaving the pondering state - including transmuting the pondering trait due to the years of going around and around in our minds - and entering into a mind state centered on the present moment. Going from the not present - past and future - to the present, implies the disappearance of the ego as we cannot recall lived moments or fantasize about the future; evading the present is a resistance of the self to defend its illusory existence. For this reason, it is so difficult for most people to focus on the here and now, especially if they have not been previously trained in this task.

Meditation, in the words of V. Simón, is a mental exercise (bhavana) that allows us to calm the mind (samatha) with the purpose of understanding and seeing reality with greater clarity (vipassana).

**FUNDAMENTAL INSTRUCTION AND ATTITUDE. THEIR CONSEQUENCES** (p. 47)

Chapter 2 describes what we tell the mind to do when we sit down to meditate. To do this, the author follows the *mindfulness* model of a research team from the University of Toronto supervised by Scott Bishop, 2004. This model has two components that V. Simón calls: the "*essential instruction*" (self-regulation of attention so that immediate experience is maintained when we start to meditate) and the "*attitude*" (a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment that is characterized by curiosity, openness and acceptance).

Regarding the **essential instruction** of mindfulness, V. Simón, following a Thai monk, states: *whatever appears (in the mind), simply observe it*; a phrase that is easy to say but difficult to put into practice for more than a brief moment, especially at the beginning.

The author, in order to give meaning to the essential instruction, asks himself: what can be observed, when does this observation take place, what happens when the mind observes its own activity, what do we call identification and disidentification. Such questions provide the following answers: ***what is observed (the content of consciousness) and the observer (conscience, the ego)***. In order to systematize what can be observed, V. Simón (p. 51) turns to the distribution of the possible objects of observation in eight sections -



considering each of the five senses as a different section according to Siegel, 2007 - and adding as a sixth section the signals that come from the inner self; as a seventh section the phenomena that are usually considered as mental activity (emotions, feelings and thoughts) and as an eighth section the capacity to resonate or be in tune with other people emotionally, as well as guessing or imagining what is happening in their minds (what is known as the theory of mind or mentalism). The question of *when the observation takes place* leads us to be aware that the observation we make when we follow the essential instruction is a process that occurs in the present given that it means coming into contact with the present and not evading it. And the answer to *what occurs when the mind observes its own activity* is that inside of us the **observer or witness** emerges, provoking a kind of transitory mental separation, given that as we observe the **contents of consciousness**, on the one hand we realize the existence of what is observed (the object of observation, the content of consciousness) and on the other, *the observer* (conscience, the ego); "meditation" leads us to the discovery that "the observing self cannot itself be observed". According to Deikman, 1982, until only a few years ago western science had ignored this, erroneously assuming that both were phenomena of the same order and were at the same level (Cfr., Simón, 2011, p. 54). However, these theoretical distinctions are not necessary in order to meditate; following the "essential instruction" is enough for the observer to be developed.

### **What do we call identification and what disidentification?**

*Identification* presumes, prior to the development of the witness, not to distinguish between conscience or ego and the contents of consciousness. For example, the rage I express at a given moment is my identity and not a role, as in acting mode, that I am playing at a given time; there is, thus, the absence of full consciousness or *mindfulness*, just as when we function in "automatic pilot" (when to dominate a task we do not pay attention - mindless). Attachments are usually identification modes, but the most important object of identification is our own "ego", the mental image that we have of ourselves. For V. Simón, identification with the ego characterizes what we call "egoic conscience", which is the most usual mental state for most human beings.

*Disidentification*, on its part, takes place when the conscience begins to realize that it is something different than its contents, consequently producing a rupture between the self and the contents of consciousness, being a rupture that advances as we practise meditation; in the words of Maharaj, 2008, "once you realize that what appears in front of you, whatever it is, cannot be you and you cannot say "it is me" you are free from all your "persons" and their demands" (Cfr., Simón, 2011, p. 59); but disidentification is not an easy process as it requires separation from the ego itself, given that conscience is lived as something different from ego, with advances and setbacks throughout this process.

### **ATTITUDE**

Following Bishop's model, Chapter 3 is dedicated to attitude, to attitude for meditating. V. Simón, with the use of a table (see book, p. 72) compares the characteristics of "the attitude" in Bishop 2004 (curiosity, openness, and acceptance), Siegel, 2007 (the previous three plus love) and Kabat-Zinn, 2003 (beginner's mind, non-judging, acceptance, letting go, non-striving, patience, trust and consistency). These characteristics or qualities, after being widely defined and employed, can be interpreted in two ways: as instructions for performing the practice and as key words, allusions or references that allow us to evoke or come into contact with a state of consciousness we all carry inside, that which we call the state of "*presence*" (space, fullness, happiness, life and being (pp. 73 and 79). But before talking about presence, he will devote chapter 4 to emotions and chapter 5 to compassion and self-compassion.

However, given the extension of chapter 3, it seems pertinent to enumerate the self-evaluation questions that the author makes: 1. How would you describe resistance, 2. Words related or similar to "accept", 3. Phases or stages in the acceptance process, according to Germer, 4. The correct attitude for *mindfulness*, how does it express itself into the future? 5. What is the beginner mind? - and to answer at least the first one. "*I like to define acceptance as not offering resistance to the flow of life*". Or also, *not offering resistance to what already is*. Acceptance is the absence of resistance" (p.75). We resist when we refuse, or we turn to avoidance, to accept what is evident in our inner world, our sensations, emotions and feelings. Examples are the formulas by Germer (2011): **Pain x Resistance = Suffering and Negative**



**Emotions x Resistance = Destructive Emotions.** Or that proposed by V. Simón himself: **First Inevitable Suffering + Resistance = Second Suffering (evitable).**

### EMOTIONS. SEVEN STEPS FOR THEIR SELF-REGULATION AND THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

When emotions make their spontaneous appearance in meditation, just as bodily sensations and thoughts do, they become an essential element for “calming the mind and seeing with clarity”; however, it is necessary to distance oneself from them - both positive emotions and those erroneously called negative - to make use of their energy, dis-identify oneself from objects, persons or situations to which these are linked in order not to suffer or get attached and be able to continue advancing. In the words of Assaglioli, ‘we are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified, but we can dominate everything from which we dis-identify ourselves’ (cfr., V. Simón, 2011, p. 104). The understanding of our emotions will make them our ally, as opposed to suffering them as an enemy. In order to account for this, the author explains what the reason for emotions in living creatures is and some aspects of their functioning, as well as the way of responding when faced with difficult emotions in order to prevent psychological damage and inappropriate actions.

The limits of our “*window of tolerance*”, a concept provided by Siegel (Cfr., Simón, 2011) - between depression and rigidity on the one hand, and chaos, on the other - with the practice of mindfulness is kept inside the window; that is, that with its practice we are developing the prefrontal structures that facilitate both the modulation of emotions as well as the maintenance of emotional stability. According to Siegel, 2010 (cfr., Simón, 2011, p. 111) “the vision of the mind allows us to direct the flux of energy and information toward integration...” and this leads to the absence of illness and the apparition of wellness. The practice of emotion regulation implies **seven possible steps** whose order and number is unalterable: *stop, breathe deeply to calm oneself, be aware of the emotion, accept the experience - allowing the emotion to emerge, give oneself love (self-compassion), let go of the emotion and act on it or not, according to the circumstances.* Our author also synthesizes the whole emotion regulating process by means of two metaphors: that of the mother who comforts the crying child and that of considering emotion as a potato we want to cook.

### COMPASSION AND SELF-COMPASSION: THEIR SKILLS OR COMPONENTS

Acquiring self-compassion skills, which is the object of chapter 5, becomes essential for emotion management. *Mindfulness*, considered the heart of Buddhist psychology (Nyanaponika Thera, 1965; cfr., Simón, 2011, p. 133), is at the same time a method and a group of techniques, a mental process that decreases the tendency we have to make our lives more difficult fighting against the discomfort we find in it. When we are overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions, we need to pacify the bull we have inside and be comforted in order to become aware again (mindful), but for this we need compassion; this is developed or increased with practice. **Three skills** or mental processes of *Mindfulness* meditation are: *consciousness focused on one single point (concentration), open-field awareness (mindfulness) and loving kindness and compassion* (Salberg, 2011; cfr. Simón, 2011, p. 1344). The mind is a difficult place to inhabit and more so when we have grown, as when at rest it automatically searches for problems in the past (remorse) and anticipates problems in the future (anxiety). This automatic activity of the brain is called “default-mode network”. The three abilities described help us to live more peacefully, focalizing attention, looking at what appears to us, and giving ourselves love.

If “**compassion**” means “suffering with another person”, empathy in response to pain, and has *two key elements*: becoming emotional with suffering and the desire to alleviate this - the author gives a precise meaning of the concept in relation to other similar terms such as empathy, sympathy, love, altruism and pity (p.137-8) - “**self-compassion**” is taking care of ourselves when we are suffering in the same way we take care of others when we have compassion and not reacting toward ourselves with responses of self-criticism, withdrawal, or self-absorption (pondering) . Three components are activated when we practice - and have led to the Self-Compassion Scale by Kristin Neff (Cfr., Simón, 2011, p. 139) - which are self-kindness, a sense of common humanity and mindfulness (thoughtful, calm attention). “When I feel sad I try to get close to my feelings with acceptance and openness” (p. 140). The main obstacle for self-compassion is to believe oneself to be indulgent, but research has shown that people with self-compassion have a higher probability of learning from their mistakes and become recommitted to their goals, whether these are going on a diet, studying, etc., making the statement by C. Rogers true “*The curious*



*paradox in life is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change*" (cfr., Simón, p. 142). On this same page, the author provides three Web Pages of programs that are developing the explicit field of self-compassion; the same MSBR 8-week program by Kabat-Zinn seems to develop self-compassion in the people who participate in it. In addition, a series of exercises for the practice of self-compassion are offered: a) through five paths: the physical, the mental, the emotional, the relational, and the spiritual; b) by means of *Soften, Soothe, and Allow* in order to quickly manage difficult emotions; c) the use of self-compassion, so that our mind goes from feeling threatened to feeling safe; loving-kindness meditation, specifying erroneous ideas regarding said meditation. Chapter five ends with neurological evidence, "training the mind" (p. 154-5), *therapy to perform*, giving as an example the author of the Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) by Paul Gilbert, indicating that it is a curative relationship in daily life "that in which we can tell another person about our emotional pain, who in turn contains our pain during the conversation and then we can borrow this focus of our suffering, which is kinder, more loving and comforting, taking it into our lives and with the Meditation of inhaling and exhaling compassion.

## THE PRESENCE

Although it is not easy to express the concept of presence as it a mental state that one has to live or experience first hand, the theme of the book takes us to the state of presence. If in chapter 2 we were shown that the development of the witness brought with it the capacity to distinguish between consciousness and contents, in chapter 6 we are told that when we are capable of perceiving content - without losing track of what we do with our conscience or from our conscience-, is when we begin to be in "presence". We are present in the things that happen, but we do not lose sight of the *presence of the observer*. However, when we are in presence, there is always an **awareness of the space** where the forms that we experience appear; thus, space is one the symbols most used to talk about presence, just as light and vision are usual images to evoke consciousness.

**Space** as "the formless world", the void.... - along with the consideration about light - is the most metaphysical part (although it is within our physics) of the book. Usually, we do not identify ourselves with the world of forms, to the point that we are not even aware of the existence of space, which is what allows forms to appear.

In our identification with forms, we fight against them and with them. Most human beings are at war with the world of forms. And not being able to get the forms to be what they want them to be is what causes suffering. Being immersed in the world of forms makes us miss out on the experience of infinite space, calm, open, limitless. But to access space, the formless world, one must stop resisting forms. "*Space emerges when no resistance is offered to form*" (Tolle, 2005; cfr., Simón, p. 167).

The author asks us to respond to the following four questions to evaluate chapter 6: How would you define presence with words? Which metaphor about presence is your favorite? What does the practice of looking at the sky involve? And explain the difference between conscience and its contents, namely, what do we understand for the world of forms?

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In this last chapter, the seventh, V. Simón shows us walking meditation, informal meditation, the obstacles (sleepiness and uneasiness or agitation), the advantages and disadvantages of the readings, the Sangha (community of monks or disciples that are gathered around a master to meditate and to follow his teachings), the retreats, the most important, and the self-evaluation answering: 1. What is the Sangha?, 2. Who are the kalyana mitta?, 3. What are the differences found through practice between seated meditation and walking meditation?, 4. Which is the most frequent obstacle you are faced with when meditating and what do you do to overcome it? And 5. Of all that you have read in this book, what phrase would you chose?

## CRITICAL CONSIDERATION

I would like to indicate how easy and complex this review has been. It has been easy because Vicente Simón carries you along step by step, and complex because each step becomes an immense ocean in which to dive, and from which one can dash out suddenly to continue reading or remain in a drowsy state in the mental experiences. Given the richness of the book, several alternatives presented themselves: to continue reading and reviewing, using the index at the beginning of each chapter; to inquire into the structure of each chapter and provide an account of the analogies and differences; to answer the questions at the end of each chapter and give them form; to start from the author's question, what phrase would you choose of all that you read in the book?



Then to select one and develop this review based on it. As examples: “when I feel sad, I try to get close to my feelings with acceptance and openness” (p. 140); “space emerges when one does not offer any resistance to form” (Tolle, 2005; cfr., Simón, p. 167); “you are not what happens, you are he to whom it happens” (Nisargadatta Maharaj, cfr., Simón, p. 77) or the paragraph by Tenzin Wangyal, 2008 that we will not report given its extension (cfr., Simón, 166); to perform the practices proposed in each chapter, write whatever happens and analyze the relation it has to the theoretical contents of the chapter; to gather or give an account, just as the author does, to the ample psychoneurological evidence that exists regarding the effects on quality of life of people or groups who practice *mindfulness* and those who do not, that is, training the mind (p. 154-5); by means of the exercises, besides the meditations, that are proposed in each chapter (e.g., chap. 5, p. 143-147); or lastly, reflecting on the more metaphysical, philosophical, or spiritual considerations.

The author, thus, displays a theoretical command of a topic that is not at all easy, in its scientific and practical domains, taking as an option for practice- meditation with arguments provided from research, with praiseworthy clarity. I am sorry to have done a review emphasizing the theoretical aspects of mindfulness more than those of Meditation for which I do not feel authorized. But my pondering mind leads me to a phrase by K. Lewin “there is

nothing more practical than a good theory”; however, the book by Vicente Simón articulates both aspects: theory and practice, going, as in a good dialectic from theory to practice and from practice to theory, with the chapters written in an agile manner without losing their ultimate sense, meditation.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that V. Simón has not succumbed to neurological and clinical attempts, so usual in university and professional environments, having opted for a manual that, step by step, stair by stair, allows the reader and practitioner of *mindfulness* to advance to where he/she wants or can. The contribution by Ramón Bayés to Vicente’s book is suitable here “the hypothesis that the practice of mindfulness is a good antidote for doctorate students. Researchers and academics are permanently immersed in the dilemma of publishing or dying.... Both V. Simón and Germer open new and useful fields for Psychology in our country. The world of research, not only those of compassion and humanization, is also sincerely grateful for this useful tool that you have placed in their hands” (p.11).

#### REFERENCES

- Germer, C. K. (2009). *The Mindfulness Path to Self-Compassion*. New York: Guilford (traducción castellana de Paidós, 2011).

