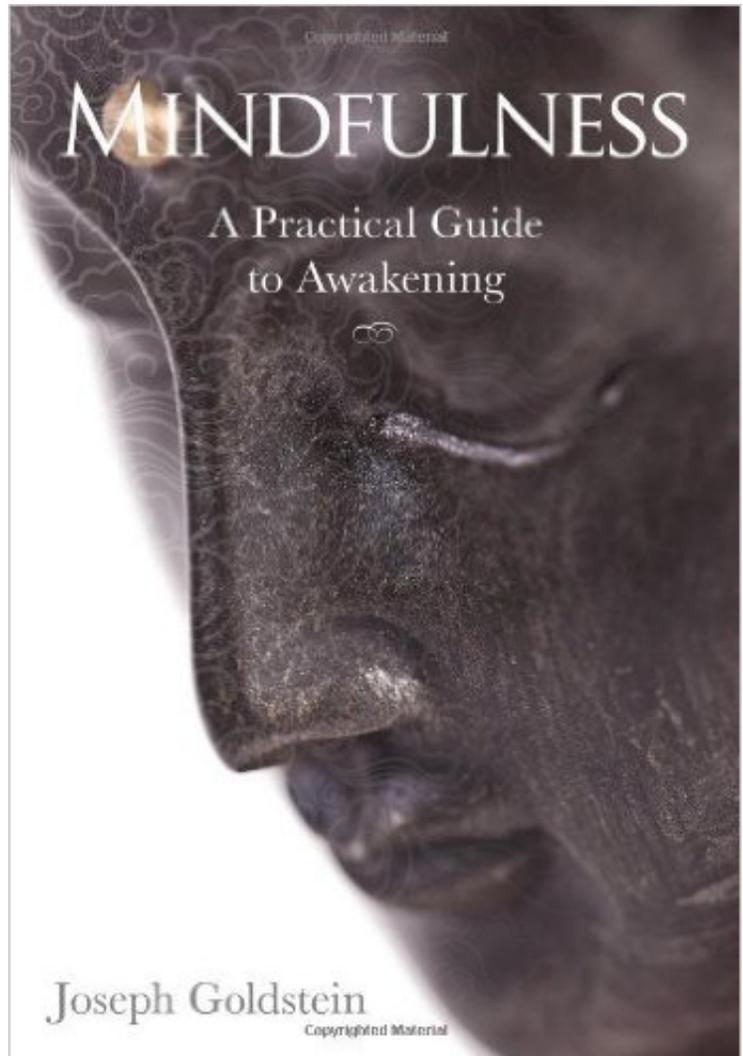


Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening

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Book Review by Jacqueline Gens

By Joseph Goldstein, Sounds True, Boulder, CO,
457 pages, 2013



Unlike most other spiritual traditions, the Buddha's path does not rely on deities and saviors, rituals, the Word or external dietary/dress regulations for Liberation but on each person's participation in a rigorous mind training that examines with ardor, comprehension and mindfulness first hand the nature of reality of self and phenomena. At the core of his teaching method, the Buddha urges us in the Four Reliance to rely on "experience" not on dogma; furthermore, to rely

on *direct* experience (Nitharta), not *indirect* (Nethartha). While not the same as direct introduction by a living master, as we know it, the Buddhist path sets a precedent for personal individuation based on direct experience over doctrine from the very outset. This thread runs through the most basic teachings to the highest culmination- thru all of Sutra, Tantra, and Dzogchen. This is important to recognize because we are not alone but part of a continuity of yogins who have already traveled the path to realization for millennia. If they can do it, so can we. But we need to begin somewhere. For some of us it is at the very beginning.

For those interested in understanding meditative stability in Sutra, indispensable as a base, the gold standard among the Buddha's many teachings remains the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Sati Patthanna Sutta). These days the word 'mindfulness' is widely used for a variety of meditation techniques both within Buddhism and also in secular contexts. Goldstein, one of the primary Western teachers of Insight Meditation based in the Theravada tradition has provided here a commentary that elucidates the pure canonical tradition of the Buddha as outlined in the *Sati Patthanna Sutta* with brilliant clarity, humor, and most importantly accessibility for both beginners and advanced practitioners. It is indeed a practical guide to refer to again and again.

In *The Precious Vase*, the Four Applications of Presence of body, feeling, mind, and phenomena [PV, p/ 138] are part of the base training drawn directly from the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. For those of you curious to go deeper, Goldstein's commentary will prove a useful reference to these essential teachings. Like many of the methods outlined in *The Precious Vase*, they are presented in the most abbreviated instruction. This does not diminish their importance. Rather it is up to us to regard the base practices according to our capacity and interest unfolding the deeper meanings as we experience them. Similarly, one simple definition can fill whole volumes if we have knowledge such as exploring the The Four Applications of Mindfulness of Presence in order to go beyond a taste of the experience.

The path of renunciation need not be about the grim reaper destroying our every joy but about renouncing our attachments, aversion, and blanket of delusion that solidifies a self and phenomena as separate outside ourselves. What we are renouncing is what causes us so much confusion and tensions so that we can really experience joy that is not dependent on outer conditions or dualistic thinking. That does not mean, of course, that we can't appreciate any moment with awareness—enjoy a sunset, smell a flower, see sky as blue, or taste a sumptuous meal. To some extent as long as we are alive, renunciation is part of our wisdom tool-box when needed if we are practitioners. From renouncing our deeply entrenched sense of me me me, to renouncing that wily thief of distraction, renunciation is the cornerstone of wise discernment or as Goldstein says, exemplifies the "wisdom of no."

Goldstein's commentary is a treasure trove of information by someone who has spent most of his life in formal meditation under the severest conditions found in Burmese and Thai monastic vihares. His many personal antidotes breathe life and pure joy into this living tradition. The author of many books on Insight Meditation, he is one of the leading Western teachers of Vipassana and

it's introduction into Western culture.

As many long time Vipassana practitioners are now turning to Dzogchen, a natural progression, so we too on the Dzogchen path might turn towards Sutra, to our our Noble roots on occasion to check our progress and drink at the well-springs of the Buddha's wisdom.

For the future it is important that we all know what is what and not mash up all the teachings into "one" big pot nor get caught up in petty sectarianism and pedantry. Rather as the first generation of Westerners in this great transition from East to West, let's all respect the enormous wisdom behind these centuries old teachings on their own terms in whatever form they manifest. A commentary like Joseph Goldstein's *Mindfulness*, guides us in knowing the profundity of the Buddha's teachings beyond a preliminary taste. Let's not forget who and what we are on the path. Otherwise we might just end up with a watered down Church of sorts, an ignorant orthodoxy that obliterates the profound heritage of direct experience into a lifeless system that loses sight of the purpose — which is to discover one's true nature.

