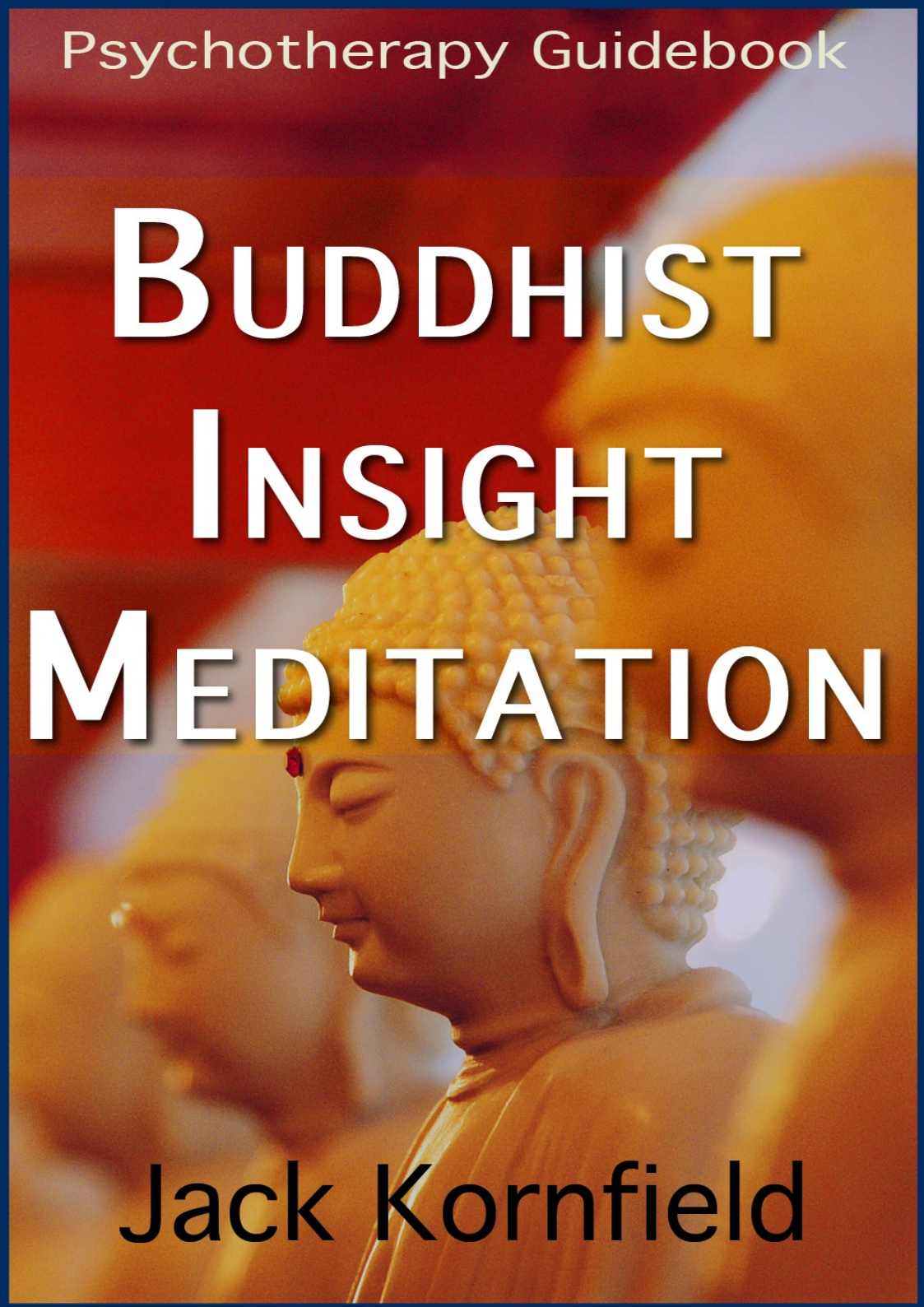


Psychotherapy Guidebook

# BUDDHIST INSIGHT MEDITATION



Jack Kornfield

# **Buddhist Insight Meditation**

**Jack Kornfield**

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## Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

# Buddhist Insight Meditation

*Jack Kornfield*

## DEFINITION

Insight, or Vipassana, meditation is a Buddhist system of mental training, based on the Buddhist psychology (Abhidhamma), which uses repetitive mental exercises to foster concentration and nonreactive awareness. Insight Meditation in some form is at the heart of all Buddhist mental cultivation. It combines a preliminary development of concentration — the training of the mind to stay steadily focused on an object — with a further cultivation of “mindfulness.” The development of mindfulness involves training the mind to see clearly, and without reaction, the changing process of all experience. The trained mind, collected, concentrated, and alert, can then become free of neurotic habit patterns, fears, and judgments by simply allowing them to arise and pass away without identifying with or acting on them.

## HISTORY

Insight Meditation is based on over 2,500 years of Buddhist tradition, coming from the understanding and teaching of Gotama Buddha. His primary

insights concerned the impermanent nature of all experience, the cause of human suffering (which is attachment and “unskillful” desires), and the understanding that there is no fixed or solid self, but rather only a constantly changing process of body and mind. He also taught the principles of habit and of mental cause and effect (karma), i.e., that attachment to reactions and attitudes become the basis for the subsequent strengthening and reoccurrence of these same reactive patterns and their underlying attitudes. He taught many techniques of mental cultivation for the development of concentration, love, compassion, and detachment, and expounded a complex psychology, the Abhidhamma, to explain all elements of mental experience. These teachings have been adapted and translated into many practices that fit into the cultural milieu of most Asian countries, from China, Japan, and Tibet south to Burma and Sri Lanka. Recently a number of skilled teachers have begun to offer this mental training in the West.

## TECHNIQUE

Insight Meditation is a specific sequence of mental training. It begins with learning to concentrate on one’s own natural breathing process, a technique repeated for a number of hours until the mind becomes tranquil and composed. This exercise is followed by a systematic training of nonjudgmental awareness on four fields of experience:

- 1) bodily and sensory perceptions,
- 2) feelings,
- 3) objects and images of the mind, and
- 4) consciousness, or the knowing faculty itself.

The mind is trained to fully allow, while being steadily aware of, the experience of any of these four fields of bodily or mental activity. The nonreactive quality of the aware mind allows all experience to unfold without the extreme response of suppression on one hand or of expression on the other. This middle ground, when developed, fosters an openness to experience without a need to act and allows psychic release and integration to occur as a natural part of the silent meditation process. As the mind becomes more skilled in the application of mindfulness, an increased awareness is carried over into all other daily activities. In this way this same release and integration infuse one's daily life.

The Abhidhamma psychology views experience as having three aspects. First is the object of experience, of which there are six classes: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, body perceptions, and objects of mind. Second are the separate classes of consciousness that arise anew in each moment. Thus there are moments of eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness,

changing with each new object. Third, there is a whole array (fifty-two in all) of mediating mental factors. These affective (of moods and emotions), cognitive, and perceptual qualities of mind determine how each moment of consciousness relates to its object. They include neutral qualities, such as perception, recognition, will, and basic attention. They also include unskillful qualities, both affective and cognitive, such as greed, hatred, fear, worry, restlessness, and doubt. Finally, there is a group of qualities, such as love, generosity, wisdom, mindfulness, tranquility, self-assurance.

The purpose of the mental training in Abhidhamma terms is to cultivate through repetition the skillful mental qualities that simultaneously inhibit the arising of the unskillful ones (which are seen as the causes of suffering and dissatisfaction). The initial training of concentration brings to the mind tranquility and a reduction in restlessness and agitation. This is followed by the training of this nonjudgmental mindfulness that functions to reduce the other unskillful factors, such as greed and hatred, and fosters the arising of openmindedness, generosity, love, and self-assurance. Ultimately, when these skillful factors become well developed, the mind becomes composed and aware enough to successively abandon some of the unskillful states and neurotic patterns for good. Wisdom, fearlessness, and calm become the predominant mental qualities, and are accompanied by increased self-knowledge and greater empathy, compassion, and understanding.



## APPLICATIONS

Most frequently used as normative psychotherapy, Insight Meditation has been successful in treating neurotic disturbances from severe to mild, some forms of depression, specific behavioral problems, and psychosomatic disorders. It is especially valuable for bringing deep personal and spiritual insight and satisfying the developmental needs of most normal adults.