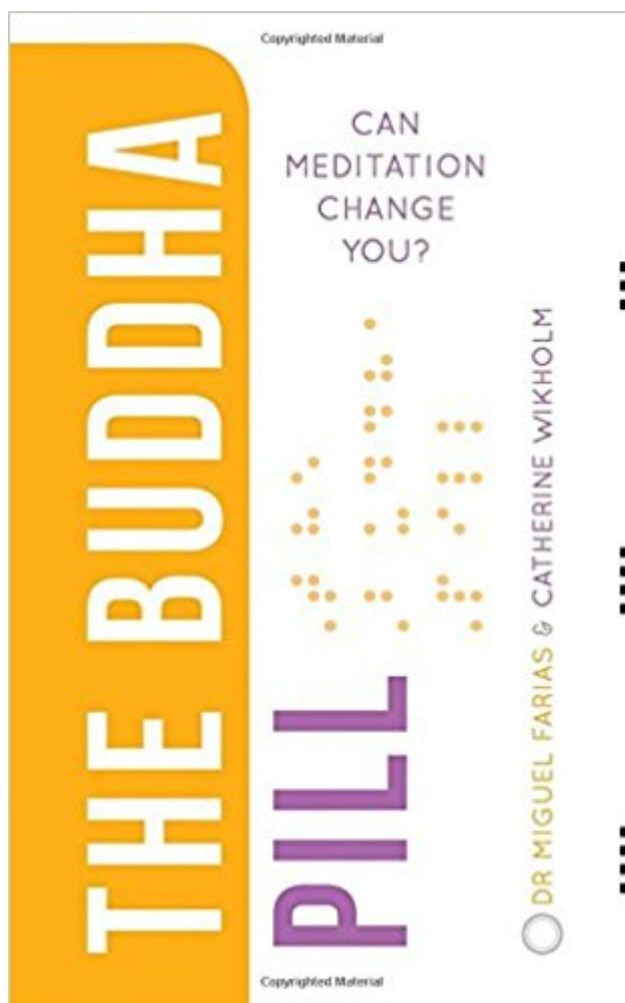


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# The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?



## Synopsis

Millions of people meditate daily but can meditative practices really make us better people? In *The Buddha Pill*, pioneering psychologists Dr Miguel Farias and Catherine Wikholm put meditation and mindfulness under the microscope. Separating fact from fiction, they reveal what scientific research – including their groundbreaking study on yoga and meditation with prisoners – tells us about the benefits and limitations of these techniques for improving our lives. As well as illuminating the potential, the authors argue that these practices may have unexpected consequences, and that peace and happiness may not always be the end result. Offering a compelling examination of research on transcendental meditation to recent brain-imaging studies on the effects of mindfulness and yoga, and with fascinating contributions from spiritual teachers and therapists, Farias and Wikholm weave together a unique story about the science and the delusions of personal change.

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## Customer Reviews

Dr Miguel Farias has pioneered brain research on the pain alleviating effects of spirituality and the psychological benefits of yoga and meditation. He was educated in Macao, Lisbon and Oxford. Following his doctorate, he was a researcher at the Oxford Centre for the Science of Mind and a lecturer at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford. He currently leads the Brain, Belief and Behaviour group at the Centre for Research in Psychology, Behaviour and Achievement, Coventry University. Catherine Wikholm read Philosophy and Theology at

Oxford University before going on to do a Masters in Forensic Psychology. Her strong interest in personal change and prisoner rehabilitation led her to be employed by HM Prison Service, where she worked with young offenders. She has since been working in NHS mental health services and is currently completing a practitioner doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Surrey. Miguel and Catherine worked together on a ground-breaking research study investigating the psychological effects of yoga and meditation in prisoners.

I highly recommend this book! I found it through a short article by the authors in New Scientist magazine. I loved this book for multiple reasons. The authors write in a clear style and they make the subject matter very interesting. They take a skeptical approach to meditation and yoga that is sorely lacking these days. The authors seem to take a fair and balanced approach to the topic of meditation. They clearly show a personal interest in the topic, but they also show an interest in being critical and scientific in their thinking. They mention their own experiences, they ask others about their experiences, they speak with meditation teachers and they also review the scientific literature on meditation. I found it particularly helpful that the authors review some of the history of the "Western" interest in meditation and scientific study of it. They start with Transcendental Meditation (TM), because the interest in TM and the claims made about its use were very similar to the current claims made about mindfulness meditation, meditation generally and yoga. People tried to argue that TM could help with a large number of problems and TM could make you a better person. The research on TM lacked decent methodology, though. When the methodology was good, the results that were unfavorable were not publicized. One of the few studies of TM with decent methodology failed to show it was better than placebo meditation (most research on meditation, almost ALL of it, lacks a decent control group or useful placebo even though it is possible to develop a good placebo for it). Similar problems can be seen with mindfulness meditation research. The authors exhaustively reviewed the mindfulness research prior to writing the book and they summarize their findings in the book. Basically, the research has overwhelmingly had poor methodology and there is also a poor description of how mindfulness is supposedly working. However, neuroscientists, psychologists, therapists, journalists, etc rave about mindfulness meditation (as well as mindfulness generally) and yoga (has a meditation component). Some people make claims that meditation is like a form of mental hygiene, wherein you can cleanse your mind. However, meditation does not work for everyone, it mainly just helps with reducing stress, you could probably reduce stress in other ways and the authors show how meditation can actually be harmful to some people (leading to depression, anxiety, psychotic symptoms and even mania). So it is quite

different from other forms of hygiene. There is no good evidence that anybody needs to do it as opposed to, say, exercising, distracting yourself with calming stuff or using relaxation techniques. The authors also address a widely circulated claim that people can become more empathic, more compassionate and less violent by meditating. The authors point out multiple examples of violent Buddhists (not just the Zen Buddhists during World War II that many of us might already know about) and even examples of people who became MORE violent after intensely training in meditation. In addition, research they did on yoga that had a meditation component used on prisoners showed no effect on aggressive behavior. They also point out how Buddhism is so much like other religions in terms of conversions, extremism, war, etc. I especially liked this part as Buddhism has been considered a "philosophy" instead of a religion by many people and many people also seem to be ignorant to how similar Buddhists are to people in other religions. Basically, Buddhism will not save the world, at least not for the reasons many people have claimed. It is not that different, coherent or more rational from many other religions. I am glad somebody wrote about it. They also call attention to the fact that there is no logical connection between meditation and being nicer. Even some devout Buddhists they interview and quote are bothered that meditation has been divorced from the other aspects of Buddhism as they do not think it would be helpful to change a person in a significant positive way without the other teachings of Buddhism. I especially liked that the authors argue people should take into account the bias many meditators could have going into meditation for the first time. For instance, they could have been taught beforehand by researchers, people they met, an article or in general that meditation makes you more compassionate. They then could have become more compassionate because of said expectation (this is a well known psychological effect). So, in such a case, the meditation operates like a placebo and the real thing that makes a change in the person is the belief that it is 1) important to be compassionate, 2) they are going to become more compassionate if they do this thing. There are thoughts about meditation that could be the real active ingredient, in which case mindfulness meditation is not "thoughts without a thinker" and getting in touch with "pure awareness," but instead is being indoctrinated to believe certain assumptions about the mind, self and experience. There is much more I could say and I definitely do not do the book justice. I did not cover everything that is in the book and reading it is a good experience. Again, it is a much needed book and I recommend it to anybody! I especially recommend it to people who are not religious, care about the scientific method, think critically and think meditation might help them transform themselves in a positive way.

The potential negative effects of Eastern types of meditation have been known for decades, if not,

hundreds of years. I applaud psychologists Drs. Farias and Wikholm for taking an objective, balanced view and going against the spin of the “mindfulness” movement. They both have done extensive research and have deep knowledge of the field. Although they take a more secular, spiritually sanitized, approach toward yoga and meditation, I highly recommend their book “Buddha Pill.” They do an excellent job of summarizing the often poorly controlled research into the effects of meditation as well as sharing several anecdotal cases of some of its disastrous outcomes. I am very heartened that the authors have chosen to go against the grain as the mindfulness movement picks up steam as a therapeutic alternative to other forms of therapy. One of the most important subtleties that the authors raise is whether the basically Buddhist approach of “mindfulness” meditation is short circuiting a deeper, more thorough approach toward healing. Dealing with memories and thoughts in Buddhist approaches often involves taking a non-judgmental stance toward often emotionally charged thoughts and memories by accepting them nominally as just “mental events.” The issue is that this approach just seeks to decondition the emotional charge of the thought or memory and does not deal with the holistic reality of why the memory still maintains an emotional charge or irrational belief. Since “mindfulness” is often about neutralizing beliefs about the moral nature or importance of past actions held in memories, it is indeed entering the spiritual realm and is not spiritually neutral. Given its spiritual nature, it would be beneficial to measure the effectiveness of “mindfulness” compared to Christian approaches to healing prayer. Christian prayer ministry approaches such as “Theophostic Prayer” seek to have God by His Holy Spirit bring truth to the memories and seek to dismantle the lies or irrational beliefs that the person holds about the memory or thought. Since much of Dr. Farias and Wikholm’s research was directed to the efficacy of using “mindfulness” meditation and yoga to potentially address inherently spiritual issues in prison populations, other spiritually rooted interventions should be compared as well. However, given the secular bias towards Eastern interventions that can supposedly be more easily separated from spiritual beliefs, I don’t see this happening any time soon. What we see happening in the “mindfulness” movement is just a replay of Transcendental Meditation movement trying to market TM as a purely physiological process in the 1970’s. As a point of information, over the last ten years I have ministered to a large number of people suffering from the negative effects of Eastern spiritual awakenings. These

awakenings, often called *ĀfĀçĀ â ÑĀ Ā* “Kundalini Awakenings, *ĀfĀçĀ â ÑĀ Ā* are the ultimate goal of most forms of Raja Yoga and its offshoots where meditation, mental concentration, asanas (postures) and breath control are its major components. These *ĀfĀçĀ â ÑĀ Ā* “awakenings *ĀfĀçĀ â ÑĀ Ā* occur as well in Transcendental Meditation (TM), which is a Trantic form of mantra yoga, as well is in Buddhist meditation.

As a fellow researcher of meditation, this book is very well documented. Yet, they have written it such that a casual reader will gather just as much from it.

The discussion of the various effects of meditation (the positive and negative) are, in my opinion, long overdue. Meditation and mindfulness have become techniques used in a therapeutic clinical context and we urgently need an open discussion of its merits, limitations and adverse effects, especially amongst health professionals (including meditation/mindfulness teachers). As a clinical psychologist, I am concerned that we are using these techniques without knowing the full extent of its consequences. This book helped me to see that I am not the only one concerned. Should meditative techniques be used for mental health purposes? How much do we actually know about its foundations? I am not opposed to the idea of using it in clinical practice but we need to be fully aware of the implications and processes it involves. I have personally experienced quite strong sensations and emotions while meditating and having a trained teacher around was essential in allowing me to understand what was happening. This book has helped me think more clearly about these questions and to question how appropriate it is to use mindfulness in a clinical context.

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