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EQUIVOCALITIES OF THE DEFINITION AND PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS: COMPARING THE MODERN AND TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF THE TERM

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Abstract: The term *mindfulness* has become increasingly popular in the West due, in no small part, to contemporary studies of mindfulness-based therapies in psychology. According to the Pali Nikāyas, mindfulness practice is the heart of Buddhism, for it alone can lead one to enlightenment. However, are contemporary and traditional accounts of the practice of mindfulness referring to the same technique?

In this paper I will argue that modern accounts of mindfulness in the field of psychology omit important features of the classical Buddhist accounts of the term: specifically, the sense of mindfulness (*sati*) as *recollection*, and the context of mindfulness practice, which includes significant *ethical* and *cognitive* implications. I will argue that the exclusion of these aspects of *sati* leads to confusion and to the neglect of constitutive features of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness that could prove beneficial to modern contemplative practitioners as well as to both psychology and cognitive science.

While the Western psychological tradition emphasizes the nonjudgmental and present-centered nature of mindfulness —bare attention— (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), the classical accounts given in traditional Buddhist texts, both Theravada and Mahayana, emphasize the relation of *sati* to memory and the cognitive and evaluative aspects of the practice, as well as its ability to distinguish and select between wholesome and unwholesome tendencies. Classical sources also emphasize the need for mindfulness practice to be embedded in the Noble Eightfold Path. While contemporary mindfulness is practiced as a way to better enjoy the present moment, the traditional notion of *sati* is actually supposed to induce “disenchantment” with our present circumstances so as to be motivated to free oneself from *samsara* (Wallace, 2006). Thus, close analysis reveals that, although the notion of bare attention is not completely foreign to traditional views, it by no means exhausts the complete meaning of *sati*.

As long as the recollecting, cognitive, and ethical features of *sati* are ignored, mindfulness will continue to be regarded merely as a therapeutical tool for reducing mental symptoms, rather than for irreversibly eliminating mental afflictions (*klesha*) from their root, which is the fundamental goal of Buddhist practice. In addition, as long as the scientific literature

over-emphasizes the nonevaluative aspects of mindfulness, it will not be possible for cognitive science to study the cognitive effects of such a practice and the possibility of cultivating extraordinary mental states by way of it. If there is genuine interest in studying the potential effects of *sati*, research should include all facets of this practice and should extend beyond clinical settings.

The term *mindfulness* has become increasingly popular during the past three decades in the West predominately due to the contemporary studies of mindfulness-based therapies (MBT) in psychology. These studies were pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which claims to be rooted in Buddhist practices.¹ Most contemporary psychological studies on mindfulness are derived from Kabat-Zinn's MBSR techniques and definition of mindfulness. In this paper I will examine both modern psychological and traditional Buddhist definitions and practices of mindfulness. This review hopes to reveal that modern accounts of mindfulness in the field of psychology omit important features of the classical Buddhist accounts of the term: specifically, the sense of *sati* (mindfulness) as *recollection*, and the context of *sati* (the Noble Eightfold Path), which includes significant *ethical* and *cognitive implications*. Most importantly, the exclusion of these features of mindfulness creates equivocalities which lead to confusion and to the neglect of the ethical and cognitive importance of the Buddhist practice of *sati*.

Even though Kabat-Zinn acknowledges that MBSR is “free of the cultural, religious, and ideological factors associated with the Buddhist origins of mindfulness”², he doesn't seem to differentiate or doesn't explicit the differences between his proposed method and the original Buddhist methods. Other researchers such as Scott R. Bishop, Mark Lau et al fall prey to the same criticism.³ Consequently, it is frequent to find modern and traditional mindfulness methods conflated both in the Buddhist world -when there is not enough knowledge of the characteristics of the methods employed in mindfulness studies in psychology- and in the scientific world - where there is often little or no knowledge at all of Buddhist contemplative methods. The primary aim here will be to clarify the difference between the Western psychological and Buddhist mindfulness methods and to point out the possible scientific and therapeutic advantages of taking into account the full depth of the Buddhist practice of *sati*.

Modern accounts of mindfulness

According to the Pali Nikayas (teachings attributed to the historical Buddha, on which Theravada Buddhism is based), mindfulness practice is the heart of Buddhism; it alone can lead one to enlightenment.⁴ An enlightened being is one who has freed himself from all mental afflictions and suffering — according to the Theravada tradition — and one who has also brought the virtues of knowledge, compassion and power to their ultimate perfection in order to be maximally effective in serving the needs of other sentient beings —according to the Mayahana tradition—.⁵ However, upon reading some of the literature on the Western psychological practice of mindfulness, one will be highly skeptical that such a simple practice could have the power to

¹ Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145.

² *Idem*, p.149.

³ Bishop, Lau, et al, 2004, p.230.

⁴ Analayo, 2006.

⁵ Wallace, 1998, p.62.

bring about such grand and extraordinary results. It is no wonder that so many westerners have come to regard the idea of enlightenment as nothing more than an unrealistic metaphor.

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as: “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.”⁶ Although there are some small variations within the different mindfulness-based psychological interventions, there are many similarities. Baer et al describe these commonalities:

Although these interventions vary in their approach to teaching mindfulness skills, several general instructions are common to most mindfulness exercises. Often, participants are asked to focus their attention on an ordinary activity, such as breathing, walking, or eating, and to observe it carefully. They are invited to notice that their attention may wander into thoughts, memories, or fantasies. When this happens, they note briefly that the mind has wandered and then resume attending to the target of observation. (...) Brief, covert labeling of observed experience, using words or short phrases, such as “aching,” “sadness,” or “wanting to move” is often encouraged. (...) Participants are encouraged to bring an attitude of friendly curiosity, interest, and acceptance to all observed phenomena while refraining from evaluation, self-criticism, or attempts to eliminate or change the phenomena they observe. For example, no attempt is made to evaluate thoughts as rational or distorted, to change thoughts judged to be irrational, or to reduce unpleasant emotions.^{7, 8}

Contemporary mindfulness methods thus seem to focus on residing completely on the present moment without any kind of judgment, bringing back attention every time it is lost, and not reacting impulsively to thoughts and emotions. Baer et al. (2006) have identified five elements in mindfulness: observing, describing (labeling the observed with words), acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience and non-reactivity to inner experience.

In summary, the Western tradition of mindfulness emphasizes the nonjudgmental nature of mindfulness as a state of awareness in which thoughts may be observed impartially, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them so that it might be possible to disengage from habitual thought and emotional patterns and cultivate a more decision-based way of responding to circumstances. The present-centered nature of mindfulness is also emphasized with the objective of learning to stay in the present moment.

This modern account of mindfulness is very similar to the description given by several teachers of the so called *neo-vipassana* movement, which has emerged from the modern Theravada tradition.⁹ Bhante Gunaratana describes mindfulness as nonjudgmental, present-centered “bare attention”:

Mindfulness is an impartial watchfulness. It does not take sides. (...) Mindfulness sees all experiences as equal, all thoughts as equal, all feelings as equal. (...) Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is “bare attention”. It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts. It does not get hung up on

⁶ Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145.

⁷ Baer et al., 2004, p.192.

⁸ There are studies on mindfulness in which the instructions are much more brief and limited. For example, in a study by Lau and Bishop (2006), the *only* instruction given to the participants was: “For the next 15 minutes, please pay attention to your breathing and anything that might arise during your experience.”

⁹ Wallace, 2006, pp.60-62.

ideas or opinions or memories. It just looks. Mindfulness registers experiences, but it does not compare them.(...) Mindfulness is present time awareness. It takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present moment.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Joseph Goldstein —one of the first American to teach these kinds of methods— remarks:

There is one quality of mind which is the basis and foundation of spiritual discovery, and that quality of mind is called “bare attention.” Bare attention means observing things as they are, without choosing, without comparing, without evaluating, without laying our projections and expectations on to what is happening; cultivating instead a choiceless and non-interfering awareness¹¹

These modern descriptions and practices of mindfulness are in stark contrast to the classical accounts given in traditional Buddhist —both Theravada and Mahayana— texts. These traditional sources reveal that, although the notion of bare attention is not completely foreign to the classical view on *sati*, it does not exhaust the full practice of mindfulness. Indeed, Ven. Nyanaponika, who first coined the term “bare attention”, regretted the misunderstanding it led to: intended to explain only one part of the practice (the initial phase), it has been mistaken to be the whole of mindfulness practice.¹²

Traditional accounts of mindfulness

Mindfulness is the translation of the Pali term *sati*, or its Sanskrit equivalent, *smṛti*, which are both related to the notion of memory.¹³ Perhaps a word that conveys better the relationship of mindfulness to memory is *recollection*. *Sati* refers to the quality of the mind as it recollects, or keeps in mind, its object.¹⁴ Within the classical Theravada tradition, Buddhaghosa gives this definition of *sati*:

By means of it, they [i.e., other mental processes] remember, or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering. Thus it is *sati*. Its characteristic is not floating; its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding or the state of being face to face with an object; its basis is strong noting or the close applications of mindfulness to the body and so on. It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being set in the object, and like a gatekeeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on. (*Visuddhimagga*, XIV 141).

It is said that whereas a mind without mindfulness “floats” on the surface of its object the way a gourd floats on water, mindfulness sinks into its object the way a stone placed on the surface of water sinks to the bottom (*Dhammasangani Malatika*). These descriptions of *sati* agree with those of Asanga and Vasubandhu (the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhist philosophy), who define *sati* as “the nonforgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the function of nondistractedness”.¹⁵ In the words of the Buddha himself as recorded in the Pali canon:

¹⁰ Gunaratana, 2002, pp.139,140.

¹¹ Goldstein, 1976, p.20.

¹² Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

¹³ Analayo, 2006, p.229.

¹⁴ Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

¹⁵ Wallace, 2005, p.157.

And what monks, is the faculty of sati? Here, monks, the noble disciple has sati, he is endowed with perfect sati and intellect, he is one who remembers, who recollects what was done and said long before. (*Samyutta-Nikāya* V 197-8).

In contrast to the Western psychological tradition's insistence on the present-nature of mindfulness, the Buddha emphasizes the importance of the use of sati to recollect the past. However, there is also a sense in which sati may refer to a “prospective memory” which can enable us to be able to remember to do things in the present and future.¹⁶

To better understand sati as recollection, it is useful to understand the Buddhist account of consciousness. According to the Abhidharma, the mind is a continuous series of discrete mental events related to each other in causal connections. Every moment of awareness dissolves after performing its function and gives rise to the next mental event. Each mental state lasts for a moment and is succeeded by another. Similar to James' stream of thought, the continued mental events form a stream of consciousness. Each mental state, being a moment of awareness (*citta*), is considered primary. Along with primary awareness come secondary factors, which condition and determine primary awareness. These mental factors qualify the awareness as being focused or distracted, pleasant or unpleasant, virtuous or non-virtuous, etc. Some of the mental factors (like attention) are always present, while others are present only in some mental states. Mindfulness belongs to the variable kind of mental factors according to Buddhist Sanskrit sources, whereas the Pali Abhidhamma defines it as a wholesome mental factor, which does not correspond at all closely to bare attention or the modern definitions of mindfulness.

When one is in a mindful state, one is being constantly aware of the moment of consciousness that has just elapsed. Even though it might seem to us that we are resting our awareness in the present, in fact, we are actually recollecting our previous “pulse” of consciousness. Mindfulness' retentive power refers to the ability of the mind to keep itself in mind by way of recollecting its previous mind-moment in the stream of consciousness. The sense of being in the present is due to the rapidness with which mental-moments succeed each other. *Recollection* is the concept that explains both the sense of mindfulness as being in the present and its function of remembering. Retention, or recollecting, is what prevents the mind from “floating” away and allows it to stay close to its object of attention.

In short, mindfulness refers both to the ability of the mind to recollect immediately past mind-moments — giving the stream of consciousness a stronger sense of continuity and coherency — and to the recollection of events that happened over an extended period of time. Regarding the ability to retain the present in the form of immediately past mind-pulses, Alan Wallace explains that “sati entails an ongoing process of remember to remember the object of interest, without forgetfulness (the opposite of recollection).”¹⁷ In turn, the recollection of the immediate past facilitates the remembering of the same event in a distant future. Whatever we were mindful of will be easier to remember in the future, and the more mindful we were at the moment, the easier it will be to remember that moment. Furthermore, a mindful state of mind in the present is also necessary to be able to retrieve events of the distant past.¹⁸

In one of the earliest accounts of what sati is, Nagasena explains further characteristics of mindfulness as “calling to mind” and “taking hold”:

¹⁶ Wallace, 2006, p.61.

¹⁷ Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

¹⁸ Dreyfus, 2010.

Sati, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts... Sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies. (*Milindapañha* 37-38).

Far from trying to experience thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental way, sati is said to be explicitly cognitive and evaluative, distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome, beneficial and destructive tendencies. These cognitive, evaluative and ethical dimensions of sati are completely neglected in the modern Western account. Contrary to nonjudgmentally allowing whatever arises in the mind, the Buddha said that “a monk does not tolerate an arisen thought of sensual desire... ill-will... cruelty... or any other arisen unwholesome state, but abandons it, eliminates it, and completely dispels it.” (*Girimananda Sutta* 10.60).

According to the renowned Theravadan monk Bhikkhu Bodhi, there cannot be mindfulness “completely devoid of ethical evaluation and purposive direction.”¹⁹ Within the context of the Noble Eightfold Path (the practical guideline taught by the historical Buddha as the way to achieve the cessation of suffering), right mindfulness must always be guided by right view and right intention, as well as being grounded in the three ethical factors (right speech, action and livelihood) and cultivated in conjunction with right effort and right concentration. Thus, the practice of mindfulness must be embedded in the Noble Eightfold Path, and this presupposes the distinction and selection of wholesome versus unwholesome mental states.²⁰ Analayo agrees that to embark on *sattipatthana* practice (the applications of mindfulness), one must have “a basis in ethical conduct and the presence of ‘straight’ view as necessary foundations.” The ethical foundations required to practice mindfulness are also expected to be strengthened as a result of the practice.²¹

Sati, together with right view and right intention, is supposed to recognize *samsara* as a vicious cycle and thus help cultivate the motivation to strive for liberation. Contrary to this, the Western modern notion of mindfulness is undertaken as a way to enable people to completely accept their present circumstance and be more fully in the here and now. The traditional notion of sati is actually supposed to induce “disenchantment” with our present circumstances. Instead of sitting comfortably in the familiarity of *samsara*, the idea is to be freed from it. This is not to say that the psychological practice of mindfulness might not be helpful for people who suffer from depression, anxiety, chronic pain, etc. However, it is important to have clarity on the different methods, objectives and effects of the different types of mindfulness practice.

According to the traditional account, the proper practice of right mindfulness integrates sati with *sampajañña*, translated as clear comprehension, clear knowing or introspection. Clear comprehension is the right wisdom that is based on right attentiveness.²² In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, clear comprehension or clear knowing represents the presence of deliberateness, and in the *Samyutta Nikaya* it refers to the awareness of the impermanent nature of feelings and thoughts. A discourse in the *Anguttara Nikaya* also recommends clear comprehension for

¹⁹ Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

²⁰ Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

²¹ Analayo, 2006, p.271.

²² Nyanaponika Thera, 1962, pp.45-46.

overcoming unwholesomeness and establishing wholesomeness.²³ The objective of *sampajañña* is to become a regulative force in our daily lives which makes all activities and thoughts purposeful and in accordance with our ideals and understanding.²⁴ *Sampajañña* is not a separate mental factor (like mindfulness) but rather a form of discrimination closely related to mindfulness. In the Mahayana tradition, it is regarded as a derivative form of intelligence (*prajna*), which is one of the mental factors. *Sampajañña* provides the comprehension deriving from paying close attention to experience; it enables one to understand and evaluate. It can be described as a wise kind of attention or mindfulness that comes out of developing this faculty.²⁵ It is only when mindfulness and clear comprehension work together that right mindfulness can fulfill its intended purpose.²⁶ In the words of Analayo²⁷:

Such cooperation of mindfulness with clear knowledge, which according to the “definition” is required for all *sattipatthana* contemplations, points to the need to combine mindful observation of phenomena with an intelligent processing of the observed data. Thus “to clearly know” can be taken to represent the “illuminating” or “awakening” aspect of contemplation. Understood in this way, clear knowledge has the task of processing the input gathered by mindful observation, and thereby leads to the arising of wisdom.

In summary, within the Buddhist context, bare mindfulness is not supposed to be practiced on its own accord. Within the Buddhist path, bare mindfulness seems to be more of a conceptual abstraction than a phenomenological factuality. In practice, *sati* is cultivated by way of *shamatha* (the practice of refining attention, which includes mindfulness and introspection), and *applied* in the practice of contemplative insight (*vipassana*).²⁸ In the Buddha's discourse on the four applications of mindfulness (*Satipatthana Sutta*), *sati* is presented as a quality of the mind that must be directed to the body, feelings, mental states and processes, and phenomena at large in a contemplative insight exercise that is meant to investigate the origination, presence, causal efficacy and dissolution of each domain of experience.²⁹ Rather than mindfulness *per se*, it is the wise and insightful application of *sati* that leads to enlightenment.

Conclusions

By delving deeper into the construct of mindfulness by comparing both the traditional and the modern definitions of the term, it is clear that, although the modern notion of mindfulness as bare attention is not necessarily mistaken, it is only a partial account of the practice of mindfulness. In the Buddhist traditional account, the practice of bare attention is not an end in itself but merely a tool to an ultimately ethical and cognitive objective. To avoid confusion, both methods and views should be clearly differentiated by those who use the term *mindfulness*. A possible solution might be to choose different terms to refer to these methods (e.g. to always use the term *sati* when referring to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness).

²³ Analayo, 2003, pp.39-40.

²⁴ Nyanaponika, 1962, pp.45-46.

²⁵ Dreyfus, 2010.

²⁶ Wallace & Bodhi, 2006.

²⁷ Analayo, 2003, p.42.

²⁸ Wallace, 2006, p.62.

²⁹ Wallace, 2006, p.62.

Regarding the scientific study of mindfulness, as long as the recollecting, cognitive, and ethical features of mindfulness are ignored, mindfulness will continue to be regarded merely as a therapeutical tool for ameliorating the mind of the symptoms of its afflictions (klesha) rather than regarding it as a means to irreversibly eliminate afflictions from their root, which is the fundamental goal of Buddhist practice.

Even though the scientific literature is increasingly filling up with articles about mindfulness, most of them come from the field of psychology—which almost always views mindfulness as a relaxation technique or a method of cultivating self-acceptance. Meanwhile, the field of cognitive science remains, for the most part, unaware of the cognitive interest of *sati*. Specially surprising is the absence of the study of mindfulness in the cognitive scientific literature concerning the study of intentions and their role in action—one would think that mindfulness practitioners, having cultivated the ability to pay close attention to mental events (such as intentions), would be ideal subjects for such experiments. The fact that cognitive scientists have paid no attention to mindfulness is probably due to the ways in which the psychological literature has defined and theorized the construct (over-emphasizing its nonevaluative and nonjudgmental aspects).³⁰

As long as mindfulness is viewed in its narrow sense and defined in such a constricted manner, the scientific investigation of mindfulness will remain only at a clinical level instead of venturing into a new territory by studying the cognitive implications of *sati* and its potential in cultivating extraordinary mental states. Furthermore, this restricted definition of mindfulness is possibly limiting the therapeutic interventions and clinical applications of mindfulness practice. If the Buddhist claim that a foundation of ethics is essential to the refinement of attention and to a true calming of the mind is right, then the current practice of Western mindfulness is limiting its potential by being blind to ethical considerations.³¹ Also important to the therapeutic use of *sati* might be its connection to insights about the causal interrelation of mental events, which is also being currently lost by viewing mindfulness as bare attention. Instruments to measure *sati* are currently being developed based upon the traditional Buddhist definition and it would be interesting to evaluate how this would compare with the existing measures of mindfulness.³²

In short, mindfulness is considered the heart of Buddhist practice not because it provides calm, self-acceptance and non-conceptuality, but rather because it is supposed to lead to the arising of wisdom through the application of insight into the nature of phenomena. This is not to say that the modern application of mindfulness in the Western psychological realm is not valuable. The research speaks for itself: hundreds of people have benefited from this kind of therapy in the treatment of anxiety, chronic pain, etc. Nevertheless, the width and depth of mindfulness practice according to the Buddhist texts must not be forgotten. To believe that the modern description of mindfulness is all there is to Buddhism, or all there is to meditation, is like thinking that the tip of the iceberg is all there is to it. To avoid this confusion and to be fair to the tradition from which the modern practice of mindfulness is supposed to have arisen, more effort should be devoted to specifying the similarities and differences between both practices. Furthermore, if there is genuine interest in studying the potential effects of meditation, it is only scientifically appropriate to explore all facets and all types of meditation in depth, without excluding features

³⁰ Dreyfus, 2010.

³¹ It is interesting to note that these observations regarding the relationship between ethical considerations and the quality of mental peace are in accordance with important roots of Western Philosophy (e.g. Socrates).

³² Chopra, Praveen (2010). Personal communication 17 July, 2010.

as important as the cognitive and ethical implications of Buddhist mindfulness practice.

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