

IS MINDFULNESS PRESENT-CENTRED AND NON-JUDGMENTAL? A DISCUSSION OF THE COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Georges Dreyfus

This essay critiques the standard characterization of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness, arguing that this account misses some of the central features of mindfulness as described by classical Buddhist accounts, which present mindfulness as being relevant to the past as well as to the present. I show that for these sources the central feature of mindfulness is not its present focus but its capacity to hold its object and thus allow for sustained attention, regardless of whether the object is present or not. I further show that for these sources mindfulness can be explicitly evaluative, thus demonstrating the degree to which classical Buddhist accounts differ from the modern description of mindfulness as non-judgmental. I conclude that although this modern description may be useful as an operational definition intended for practical instruction, it does not provide an adequate basis for a theoretical analysis of mindfulness, for it fails to emphasize its retentive nature to privilege its alleged nonconceptuality.

It is only a few years ago that I discovered the extent to which the concept of mindfulness had become common within the field of psychology. I was at first pleasantly surprised that a concept so central to Buddhist practice could be used with great effectiveness as a therapeutic tool, but quickly my enthusiasm gave way to a certain unease at the ways in which psychologists treated this topic, taking it as more or less self-evident or discussing it through cursory definitions based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990). I was struck by the extent to which these psychological discussions proceeded without any serious reference to the original Buddhist sources from which they were supposed to derive. As a Buddhist scholar I felt that these discussions often missed important points and presented a view of mindfulness that I had trouble recognizing at times. The first temptation for me was to view these presentations as simply inauthentic, failing to be true to the ideas found in the original texts. This did not disqualify them, for I thought that there is nothing wrong with a thorough reinterpretation of old ideas to adapt

them to the modern context. I understood the therapeutic use of mindfulness as an invention of tradition that provided tools and concepts useful within the context of therapeutic interventions, but I thought everybody would be better served by just dropping the reference to Buddhism and the pretense to represent authentically its ideas and practices.

Further reflections have changed my opinion without, however, completely assuaging my discomfort. This change has come as a result of my increased awareness of the great multiplicity of religious traditions. As a scholar of religious studies, I understand that the pretension to provide 'the Buddhist view of mindfulness' should be resisted as an attempt to privilege certain parts of the tradition at the expense of often less well-known aspects. Buddhism is a plural tradition that has evolved over centuries to include a large variety of views about mindfulness. Hence, there is no one single view that can ever hope to qualify as 'the Buddhist view of mindfulness.' What is often presented as 'the Buddhist view of mindfulness' is often derived from scholastic traditions, particularly from the multiple versions of the Abhidharma. These presentations are certainly of great importance to understand some of the central Buddhist ideas but they cannot be taken to provide the normative reference point, in relation to which other presentations can be judged as inauthentic. In fact, I believe that the use of the rhetoric of authenticity should be viewed with great suspicion. It is more often than not an attempt to claim authority and disqualify other views within the tradition, views that may have been marginal but are not necessarily illegitimate. Thus, I realize that some of my earlier reactions to the mindfulness movement may have reflected some of my discomfort at seeing my own claims to authority go unrecognized and my expertise bypassed. And yet, as mentioned above, this realization has not fully appeased my uneasiness.

In the following pages, I reflect on some of the reasons for this discomfort and examine the problems that I see in some of the current analyses of mindfulness based on my understanding of the Buddhist sources, which I am familiar with as a textual scholar who is interested in meditative practices and in relating Buddhist ideas to contemporary scientific discussions. It should be clear that my discussion of mindfulness is not claiming to provide a definitive or authoritative account of the Buddhist conception of mindfulness since I do not believe that such an account is feasible. It should also be clear that I am not attempting here to provide a critical evaluation of the therapeutic practices concerning mindfulness, something completely outside of my competences. Rather, I am offering a reflection on the problems that I see in the way mindfulness is conceptualized in the psychological literature and ask: does mindfulness need to be present-centred and non-judgmental, as seems to be assumed in the psychological literature? To answer this question I start by examining a standard definition of mindfulness in the literature, which presents it as a non-elaborative and non-judgmental present-centred awareness. I show how this definition reflects practical instructions given in training and argue that it does not provide the basis for a good theoretical account, for it misses the central feature of mindfulness, which is to hold its object and thus

allow for sustained attention regardless of whether the object of attention is present or not. In arguing that mindfulness is best understood as retentive, I emphasize its cognitive contribution rather than its nonconceptuality. I further argue that this retentive ability plays a central role in many cognitive processes, reminding us not to lose sight of the mnemonic aspect of mindfulness and not to confuse practical instructions and operational definitions with theoretical analysis. I conclude by showing the consequences of the failure to give due place to the cognitive importance of mindfulness.

A standard definition of mindfulness

In examining what I find problematic in many of the contemporary views of mindfulness in the psychological literature, I obviously can not do justice to all the accounts. Nevertheless, I believe that there is something close to a consensus in the professional literature concerning the characterization of mindfulness. Such an account can be found in the works of, for example, S. Bishop, who has provided what has become by now a well-accepted definition. Bishop offers this definition:

Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. (Bishop *et al.* 2004, 232)

This definition, which reflects the point of view of the therapist engaged in practical interventions, stresses two features of mindfulness. First, it emphasizes the non-judgmental nature of mindfulness as a state of awareness that allows for an observation of mental states without over-identifying with them so as to create an attitude of acceptance that can lead to greater curiosity and better self-understanding. This provides a way to disengage from the habitual patterns of discursive and affective reactivity so as to allow a more reflective response to the difficult circumstances of one's life rather than remain prisoner of one's own habits and compulsions.

Second, there is a strong emphasis on the present-centred nature of mindfulness, which is seen as focusing on what is happening in the present moment. The basic idea is that to free ourselves we need to quiet the mind and disengage it from its compulsive tendencies to conceptualize our experiences in terms of what we like and dislike. This de-automatization of our habitual judgmental tendencies is brought about by limiting the scope of our attention to what is happening in the moment. Instead of constantly evaluating our experiences in term of past memories and future expectations, we need just to take note of what is taking place in the moment, observing the experience and our reactions rather than elaborating on their content. In this way, we will be able to develop a state of non-reactive equanimity that enables us to see things as they are and act in accordance with reality rather than remain prisoner of our usual patterns of evaluative reactivity.

At the outset, I should say that there is a great deal to be commended in this characterization of mindfulness. The de-automatization of habitual patterns of reactivity and weakening of pre-potent responses is certainly an important part of Buddhist practice, which seeks to free the mind from the internal compulsions that lead to suffering. It is also clear that the emphasis on the present-centred character of mindfulness is helpful, especially at the beginning of one's practice when the mind is prisoner of its unbridled discursivity. This is not to say that mindfulness is necessarily present centred (as we will see shortly) nor that it is necessarily non-judgmental, but there is no doubt that the discipline of being able to keep the mind to stick to the present moment and refrain from its usual chatter is an important stage in the education of attention, which is the basis of meditative practice.

Let me make it clear that my point here is not to critique the practice of therapists and Buddhist teachers who have attempted to adapt classical Buddhist concepts to the modern context. Such an adaptation is necessary and not in question. What I wish to critique is the theoretical model that seems to be assumed by these practitioners so as to provide a better theoretical understanding of the cognitive mechanisms involved in the practice of mindfulness. To do this I examine the treatment of mindfulness in some of the classical Buddhist sources. I focus mostly, but not only, on the clear treatments of the question found in the scholastic commentarial tradition, particularly the presentations of various Abhidharmas (the part of the Buddhist canon that analyses the realm of sentient experience and the world given in such experience into its basic elements [*dharma*], listing and grouping them into the appropriate categories so as to undermine the postulation of an enduring unified subject). A cursory look at these sources reveals that the classical definitions of mindfulness do not correspond to the characterization of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness. Although such description is not alien to the tradition, it does not occupy the central place that many modern mindfulness practitioners assume. We may then wonder how does the classical scholastic Buddhist tradition understand mindfulness if it is not defined as present-centred non-judgmental awareness, and, perhaps more importantly, what can we learn from the classical sources about mindfulness that may help to bring out some of the features that have been missed by the standard account delineated above? But before we can do this, we should be clear about the terms of the inquiry and understand the semantic range of the words used in this discussion.

Mindfulness, *sati* and retention

The English *mindfulness* is an old word that indicates the quality of being aware and paying attention. Interestingly for our discussion, it also had the connotation of remembering and having a purpose in mind, though these usages seem to have faded away. This word has been used to translate various Buddhist terms, mostly the Sanskrit *smṛti* (Pāli *sati*, Tibetan *dran pa*). These terms are widely

used within the Buddhist tradition where they are understood to be central to the practice of meditation. There is nothing wrong with their translation as *mindfulness* as long as one keeps track of the semantic range of these terms. When we do this, however, we realize that the understanding of mindfulness/*sati* as present-centred non-evaluative awareness is problematic for it reflects only some of the ways in which these original terms are deployed.

The word *smṛti* (Pāli *sati*) comes from the Sanskrit root *smṛ*, which means to remember and keep in mind. The word itself can refer to the act of remembering and keeping in mind, as well as to what is kept in mind. Thus, the Hindu tradition calls some of its lesser sacred texts *smṛti*, that which is remembered, in opposition to the Vedas, which are *śruti*, that which have been directly heard. Within the Buddhist context, this word has usually a related but more restrained meaning and refers to the quality of the mind when it is recollecting or keeping in mind an object. The great scholiast Buddhaghosa gives this definition of *sati* within the context of the classical Theravāda tradition:

By means of it, they [i.e. other mental processes] remember (*saranti*), or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering (*sarana*). Thus it is *mindfulness (sati)*. Its characteristic is not wobbling; its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding or the state of being face to face with an object. (Nyānamoli Bhikkhu 1976, XIV 141).

This characterization of *sati* is worth noticing for at least three reasons. First, one cannot but be struck by the obscurity of the text, which proceeds by glossing the word *sati* as ‘not wobbling.’ What does this mean? Second, the various connotations provided by Buddhaghosa such as ‘not wobbling’ and ‘remembering’ do not seem to fit comfortably within a single concept. Hence, we cannot but wonder why they are described by the same term? Third, this gloss of *sati* does not look at all like the understanding of mindfulness as present-centred awareness. It is clearly at odds with this understanding of mindfulness since *sati* includes the act of remembering the past and hence is not necessarily present-centred.

Turning to other classical texts suggests views of mindfulness that are even further apart from the contemporary understanding. *The Questions of King Milinda*, for example, gives us a description of mindfulness as being explicitly evaluative. Responding to the questions of Greek King Milinda, the monk Nāgasena provides a long gloss of mindfulness as ‘not drifting’ and ‘taking up’. While explaining the former, he emphasizes the ethical dimensions of mindfulness, pointing out that the function of mindfulness is not just to keep in touch with whatever is present in the ken of attention but also includes the not drifting away from the wholesome and unwholesome mental states. This ethical emphasis confirmed by the gloss of mindfulness as the taking up, which is explained as the examination of the beneficial or detrimental nature of various mental states (Mendis 1993, 37–8) This understanding of mindfulness is quite far from the idea of mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness, for if mindfulness is to distinguish wholesome from unwholesome mental states, it must be explicitly cognitive and evaluative, in

contrast with the idea of mindfulness as non-judgmental acceptance of whatever arises within the stream of consciousness.

It should be clear that the purpose of my discussion is not just to play a game of scholarly 'got you' by pointing out the contrast between the understanding of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness and the ways classical sources deploy this concept. Rather, what I seek here is a better conceptualization of mindfulness so as to retrieve its cognitive implications, which are in danger of being lost in the rush to equate mindfulness with present-centred non-judgmental awareness. To do so, I believe that it may be useful to reflect on the ways in which classical sources deploy the concept of mindfulness/*sati*. How come that this term has very different connotations ('not wobbling,' 'remembering,' 'being face to face with the object,' 'taking up and examining' etc.)? What do these connotations have in common? It should be clear that the idea of present-centred non-judgmental awareness is not going to be of much help here since *sati* can concern recollection of the past as well as attention to the present. Hence, rather than rest satisfied with this depiction of mindfulness, I believe that we should examine the ways in which it functions cognitively, particularly the ways in which it retains information rather than merely attends to its object.

The idea of mindfulness as a retention of information may come as a surprise given the almost universal acceptance of the definition of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness. And yet the idea of mindfulness as a holding rather than a merely passive attending fits quite well with the classical Buddhist descriptions found in the *Abhidharma*, which all concur in presenting mindfulness as the ability of the mind to remain present to the object without floating away. I would like to argue that it is this retentive ability of the mind that should be taken as defining mindfulness, not its alleged present-centred nonconceptuality. It is this retentive ability that allows the mind to hold the object in the ken of the attention as well as remember it later. Hence, it should come as less of a surprise when mindfulness is presented as being relevant both to the present holding of an object and its future recollection. Both are ways of holding information and hence described as forms of mindfulness/*sati*. I would also argue that this retentive ability is central to account for how mindfulness operates cognitively and goes a long way to explain the cognitive transformations brought about by this practice.

I would further argue that this retentive ability of mindfulness is crucially connected to working memory, the ability of the mind to retain and make sense of received information. When we see an object, we are not just presented with discrete time slices of the object. Rather we integrate them within a temporal flow so that they are given as making sense. I do not see a person moving through various positions in space but rather see her as smoothly moving from one place toward another. Thus, consciousness involves the ability to put in resonance various cognitive processes so that the information they deliver makes sense and produces coherent patterns, which may not be fully accurate representations of

external objects but are good enough to guide our actions. This making sense is crucially connected to working memory, the capacity of the mind to maintain and manipulate relevant information so as to be able to engage in purposeful activities.

The idea here is not to equate the retentive ability of consciousness, working memory and mindfulness, but to argue that there is a significant overlap that helps us to understand what Buddhaghosa has in mind when he characterizes mindfulness as 'not wobbling.' Mindfulness is the mind's ability to keep the object in the ken of attention without losing it. Such an ability cannot be understood simply as a bottom-up process in which our mind remains open to whatever arises but should be seen as involving the top-down ability of the mind to retain and bind information so that the present moment of experience can be integrated within the temporal flow of experience. This holding ability of mindfulness is a natural ability that the mind has, ability that can be strengthened by practice but which exists naturally in every person, at least to a certain extent. It is this top-down capacity to hold information that is strengthened by the practice of meditation and that accounts for the development of sustained modes of attention when the mind is not carried away by the fleeting stream of data but is able to attend to objects in sustained ways.

Mindfulness is then not the present-centred non-judgmental awareness of an object but the paying close attention to an object, leading to the retention of the data so as to make sense of the information delivered by our cognitive apparatus. Thus, far from being limited to the present and to a mere refraining from passing judgment, mindfulness is a cognitive activity closely connected to memory, particularly to working memory, the ability to keep relevant information active so that it can be integrated within meaningful patterns and used for goal directed activities (Jha *et al.* 2010). By paying close attention, practitioners of mindfulness strengthen their cognitive control because they increase their ability to retain information and thus see their true significance rather than being carried away by their reactions. What is well attended to can be maintained by working memory and thus become available for appropriate evaluation.

This connection between mindfulness, working memory and proper evaluation comes through quite clearly when one looks at the Buddha's foundational teaching on mindfulness, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. This complex text, which purports to be the Buddha's own words (in opposition to the Abhidharma, which is a systematization of the words of the founder), presents a complex practice to develop mindfulness around four topics: mindfulness of the body, feelings, consciousness and mental factors (the four applications of mindfulness, *satipaṭṭhāna*). For each of the four applications, the discourse explains how mindfulness has to be practiced. In relation to the body, the text lays out several contemplations pertaining to the activities of the body, its breathing, postures and anatomical composition. In dealing with postures, for example, the text explains the development of mindfulness as based on the awareness of the posture. The text says: '...when walking, he knows "I am walking," when standing, ...'

(Anālayo 2003, 5). Similarly, when dealing with the activities of the body, breathing, feelings and other objects of contemplation, the discourse emphasizes the development of the presence of mind to what is being contemplated so that one is wide awake to the experience one is undergoing. Hence, it is quite clear that for the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, mindfulness is not just present-centred non-judgmental awareness but involves the mind's ability to attend to and retain whatever experience one is engaged in so as to develop a clear understanding of the experience and the ability to recollect such experience in the future. This evaluative aspect of the practice of mindfulness comes through even more clearly in the passage of *The Questions of King Milinda* discussed above where it is presented as the capacity to discriminate between positive and negative qualities. To understand further the place and role of this form of evaluative mindfulness, it may be helpful to widen the scope of our investigation and include, however briefly, a description of the ways in which the Abhidharma presents the full spectrum of the various forms of attention.

A phenomenology of attention

The Abhidharma offers a rich analysis of the various aspects of the mind, presenting it as composed of a series of momentary mental states. Each mental state comes to be in dependence of various conditions (such as preceding moments of awareness, object, sensory basis). Having arisen, it performs its function and dissolves, giving rise to the next mental state, thus forming a stream of consciousness or continuum not unlike James' stream of thought. Each state is understood as being a moment of awareness (*citta, sams*) endowed with various characteristics, the mental factors (*caitasika, sams byung*). Awareness, which is also described as consciousness (*vijñāna, rnam shes*), is primary in that it is aware of the object, whereas mental factors qualify this awareness and determine it as being pleasant or unpleasant, focused or unfocused, calm or agitated, positive or negative, etc. Some of the mental factors are omni-present or universal in that they are necessarily present in all mental states, whereas other factors are only present in some mental states.

These mental factors belong to various aspects of the mental. Some (feeling) pertain to the affective domain whereas others (intention) are conative or cognitive (discernment) in nature. To greatly simplify, we can say that the Abhidharma understands these various aspects to operate simultaneously and to be simply the qualities that characterize moments of awareness. Among these qualities, several pertain to the domain of attention, an important aspect of the mental processes analysed by the Abhidharma. For the Abhidharma, attention starts at an early stage with orienting (*manasikāra*, often translated as *attention*). This is the pre-attentive and automatic ability of the mind to turn toward the object and select it. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains: 'Attention (i.e. orienting) is the mental factor responsible for the mind's advertence to the object, by virtue of which the object is made present to consciousness. Its characteristic is the conducting of the

associated mental states to the object. Its function is to yoke the associated mental states to the object.' (Bodhi 2000, 81) Every mental state, inasmuch as it is conscious, has at least a minimal amount of focus on its object. Hence, orienting is an omnipresent factor, that is, any mental state contains some degree of it. It accounts for the pre-attentive noticing that takes place when an object draws our attention before being selected for closer scrutiny.

The attentive process continues with mindfulness and concentration (*samādhi*). The former is described, as argued above, as the retention of information so that the mind is not carried away from the object. Vasubandhu describes it as universal whereas Asaṅga limits it to the operative states of mind, arguing that it is absent in subliminal states of consciousness. Nevertheless, both agree that it is a fundamental aspect of the mind's ability to pay close attention by not wobbling away from the object. Orienting turns the mind toward the object whereas mindfulness retains the object and keeps the mind from losing the object. Concentration completes this analysis of the Abhidharma treatment of attention. It is the ability of the mind to remain focused and unified on its object. Hence, Asaṅga describes it as the unificatory focus of the mind on its object (Rahula 1980, 8). Although this faculty is greatly enhanced by the practice of meditation, it exists naturally in the mind, for it is simply the ability of consciousness to fixate an object. Vasubandhu describes it as a universal factor whereas Asaṅga excludes it from subliminal states. Still, both agree on its centrality in the attentional process.

These two factors (mindfulness and concentration) work in cooperation, strengthening and enhancing features of attention. Both correspond to the stage at which we purposefully notice an object and bring it into the ken of full-blown attention, the mind's ability to focus on the object and retain it. But these two factors work also in different ways. Concentration enhances the selective ability of pre-attentive orienting. It stabilizes the mind on the chosen object but tends to restrict the purview of what is being considered. Left on its own, it leads to a greater but narrower focus. Mindfulness on the other hand expands the scope of attention so that one becomes aware of the characteristics of experience (Anālayo 2003, 63–4). Thus, for the Abhidharma, attention is not just as a way of selecting particular sensory stimuli and focusing on it, but is also understood as having the cognitive function of bringing together the various aspects of the objects we encounter so as to make sense of them. Attention is the cognitive glue that holds together elementary features and transform them into identifiable forms and objects so that our experiences make sense. I take it that this cognitive ability to hold together various aspects of the perceptual process is a central aspect of mindfulness as understood by classical authors such as Buddhaghosa.

Still, this understanding of mindfulness as retentive focus does not cover all the possible meanings of mindfulness. We recall, for example, the mention by *The Questions of King Milinda* of an explicitly evaluative mindfulness, whose role seems to go beyond that of merely retaining the object. To understand this form of mindfulness, we need to consider the role of another aspect of its practice, the

development of clear comprehension (*samprajñāna*, *sampajañña*). This is not a separate mental factor but a form of discrimination (*prajñā*, *pañña*) closely connected to mindfulness that enables the mind to observe, comprehend and evaluate what needs to be evaluated. It is seen as a central element of the practice of mindfulness for it provides the comprehension deriving from paying close attention to experience. Hence, it can be described as a form of attention, a wise attention or mindfulness that derives from the cultivation of this faculty. This *wise mindfulness* is to be distinguished from what we can now call *mindfulness proper*, the more basic ability of mind to retain its object. Mindfulness proper is the cognitive basis of the more explicitly cognitive wise mindfulness, which is central to the practice of mindfulness as understood by the Buddhist tradition whose goal is not to attain higher states of consciousness through the practice of concentration but to develop a clear understanding of one's bodily and mental states as impermanent, suffering, and no-self so as to undo our suffering-inducing habits. It is mindfulness proper that leads to this understanding by paying close attention to the rise and fall of mental and bodily states. The real goal of the practice of mindfulness is the development of such an understanding, the bare observation of mental states as they arise without over-identifying with them being just a means to such an end.

Although various Buddhist traditions concur in emphasizing the centrality of clear comprehension in mindfulness practice, they present it in different ways. The Theravāda tradition does not seem to stress the introspective nature of clear comprehension, which is described simply as the knowing of what happens. This knowing can concern one's mind, body, breath, as well as other objects (Wallace and Bodhi 2006, 10). The Sanskrit tradition as expressed, for example, by Shantideva, seems to stress more its introspective nature. Clear comprehension becomes then the reflective knowledge of one's mental and bodily states. Shantideva describes it as 'the repeated examination of one's body and mind' (Batchelor 1979, V.108, 59). Similarly, Tibetan thinkers such as Tsongkhapa present clear comprehension (*shes bzhin*) as being especially focused on the observation of the workings of one's mind during the practice of meditation (Tsongkhapa 2002, 57–71). The metaphor given is that of a watchman, who does not look continuously but is ready at all times to notice events as soon as they happen. By developing mindfulness we become much more skilled at this kind of observation. Whereas at first we were slow to detect when the mind was off target in meditation, the development of mindfulness leads to a shortening of the time necessary to detect the rise of distractions and other obstacles in the mind. When we become proficient, we gain the ability to notice such obstacles almost as soon as they arise. Understood in this way, clear comprehension is the meta-attentive ability to monitor one's mental states. It is an essential part of the practice of developing attention, practice that is not just based on the ability to focus on an object (video game players can do this quite well) but involves the ability to modulate one's attention, correcting the mind when it wanders and bringing it back to the object. The Tibetan tradition captures this type of skillful or wise

mindfulness with the term *dran shes*, the combination of the retentive ability of mindfulness proper (*dran pa*) with the ability to use clear comprehension (*shes bzhin*) to understand what is happening in one's mind. It is this kind of wise mindfulness that eventually leads the practitioner to a deeper insight into the rise and fall of mental states. It is only by including this form of mindfulness that one can understand the full scope of mindfulness and realize its cognitive implications.

Conclusion: Consequences of ignoring the cognitive nature of mindfulness

We have now hopefully gained a richer understanding of the scope and semantic range of the scholastic Buddhist concept of mindfulness. We understand that mindfulness at its most basic level (mindfulness proper) is the ability of the mind to retain its object and not float away from it. This ability to retain the object is what allows the mind to bring this object into focus so that we are able to recollect it later. It is also what leads to the development of clear comprehension, a decisive aspect of the practice of mindfulness that allows the practitioner to evaluate the various aspects of his or her experience and to distinguish, for example, between wholesome and unwholesome mental factors, as stressed by *The Questions of King Milinda*. This form of wise mindfulness differs from mindfulness proper in that it explicitly includes the comprehension and discrimination of the object. Mindfulness proper is limited to the retentive aspect, which provides the basis for clear comprehension. Wise mindfulness is broader, including more explicitly evaluative and often introspective dimensions, whereas mindfulness proper is limited to the retentive aspect, so as to allow evaluation.

The practice of retentive focus (mindfulness proper) is not the goal but a means to a more explicitly cognitive end. Its main point is not to obtain a calm and focused state, however helpful such a state may be, but to use this state to gain a deeper understanding of the changing nature of one's bodily and mental states so as to free our mind from the habits and tendencies that bind us to suffering. In classical Buddhist scholastic terms, this means that mindfulness and concentration are developed for the sake of gaining insight (*vipāśyanā*, *vipassanā*) into the impermanent, suffering, and no-self nature of our bodily and mental aggregates so as to free our mind from defilements. This understanding of the body mind complex is provided at an early stage by clear comprehension, which is conceptual. But to be really effective, this insight needs to take place at the non-conceptual level. This is where mindfulness plays a decisive role. When we are able to remain carefully in touch with our experiences and to comprehend them as being impermanent, we are able to change their meaningfulness so as to see them in a different light. We then gain a direct insight into their impermanent nature, insight that is brought about by close attention and clear comprehension but goes beyond this conceptual understanding. In this way, we come to see experientially bodily and mental states as impermanent and later as suffering and

no-self, thereby lessening the mesmerizing character of our experiences so that pleasant events are seen as fleeting rather than permanently satisfactory, and unpleasant encounters are seen as temporary setbacks rather than deeply upsetting defeats. This cognitive shift is based on the development of mindfulness, the retentive ability on the basis of which we are able to make sense of our experience. This leads to clear comprehension, which operates at the conceptual level and leads to the deeper non-conceptual insight through which a decisive transformation is brought about. Thus, changes in the focus of attention lead to changes in cognitive content, something entirely obvious that seems, however, to be lost in the rush to identify mindfulness with present-centred non-judgmental awareness.

We can now see that the modern understanding of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness although not completely mistaken reflects only a partial understanding. It is only in certain contexts, particularly but not only at the beginning of one's practice, that mindfulness can be assimilated to the bare noticing of whatever arises in the present moment. Such present-centred non-judgmental attention is only one of the modalities of mindfulness, which is much broader in its scope, including explicit recollective abilities to remember the past and cognitive abilities to evaluate mental and bodily states. We also realize that the identification of mindfulness with present-centred non-judgmental awareness ignores or, at least, underestimates the cognitive implications of mindfulness, its ability to bring together various aspects of experience so as to lead to the clear comprehension of the nature of mental and bodily states. By over-emphasizing the non-judgmental nature of mindfulness and arguing that our problems stem from conceptuality, contemporary authors are in danger of leading to a one-sided understanding of mindfulness as a form of therapeutically helpful spacious quietness. I think that it is important not to lose sight that mindfulness is not just a therapeutic technique but is a natural capacity that plays a central role in the cognitive process. It is this aspect that seems to be ignored when mindfulness is reduced to a form of non-judgmental present-centred awareness of one's experiences.

I often get the feeling that the problem with such presentations of mindfulness stems from the failure to distinguish between operational definitions intended for practical instructions and adequate theoretical descriptions. There is no problem in instructing practitioners to remain aware of their mental and bodily states as they arise in the present moment while abstaining from judgments and evaluations. As mentioned above, this is a helpful way to develop mindfulness, for to do so we need to disengage from the usual patterns of discursivity and reactivity through which we usually function. But to believe that these practical instructions provide adequate theoretical models of how mindfulness works strikes me as a serious confusion. Mindfulness should not be conceptualized as being only the bare noticing of whatever arises in consciousness, for it involves essential cognitive abilities. Mindfulness is central to Buddhist practice not because it provides the degree of self-acceptance necessary to mental health but

because it leads to liberative cognitive transformations. From this perspective, it becomes important to distinguish the mature understanding provided by mindfulness from the reactive evaluative patterns that dominate our minds prior to its transformation by practice. These reactive patterns are harmful not because they are evaluative but because they are reactive, being the product of our habituation to clinging to pleasant experiences and rejecting unpleasant ones. Ordinarily, most of our judgments are dominated by this unbalanced pattern. We adopt ideas, attitudes and objects not out of mature consideration of their advantages but because we like them. The practice of non-judgmental awareness is then a useful discipline to lessen this reactivity and create the space in which we can become able to form mature judgments. Hence, it is important not to lose sight of the proper role of the nonevaluative form of mindfulness. It is not an end in itself but a skillful means that allows the weakening of pre-potent responses so as to allow more adequate attitudes.

I believe that the consequences of the misleading presentation of mindfulness as present-centred non-judgmental awareness can be seen clearly in the cognitive scientific literature. There, mindfulness is almost invariably introduced as a therapy, similar to a relaxation technique or a psychological method of self-acceptance. It is almost never presented as having important cognitive functions. Its absence is glaring in the considerable literature concerning the awareness of intentions, their role in action and the degree to which they play causal roles. I am deeply struck by the fact that I have never seen the idea of mindfulness mentioned in this context or heard about its use in relevant experiments. And yet, I would think that mindfulness practitioners would be ideal subjects for such experiments and discussions, since they are supposed to have the ability to pay close attention to their bodily and mental states. Hence, they should be able to distinguish more carefully their own intentions and the degree to which those precede their actions or fail to do so. This is at least what one would expect, and verifying or falsifying such a hypothesis through experiments would seem an obvious thing to do. And yet, very little has been done in this direction. I believe that the neglect of mindfulness by cognitive scientists is due for the most part to the ways in which this concept has been theorized in the psychological literature, where its non-judgmental aspects are over-emphasized at the expense of its cognitive dimension. I think we need to correct this situation so that the true importance of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness can come through and be part of the cross-disciplinary conversation that is likely to lead to a better understanding of the mind and its abilities.

REFERENCES

- ANĀLAYO. 2003. *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*. Birmingham: Windhorse.
- BATCHELOR, S. 1977. *A guide to the Bodhisattva's way of life*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

- BISHOP, S., M. LAU, S. SHAPIRO, L. CARLSON, N. ANDERSON, J. CARMODY, Z. SEGAL, S. ABBEY, M. SPECA, D. VELTING, and G. DEVINS. 2004. Mindfulness: A Proposed Definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11: 230–41.
- BODHI, BHIKKHU, ed. 2000. *A comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions.
- GETHIN, R. 2001. *The Buddhist path to awakening*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- JHA, A., E. STANLEY, and M. BAIME. 2010. Examining the protective effects of mindfulness training on working memory capacity and affective experience. *Emotion* 10 (1): 54–64.
- KABAT-ZINN, J. 1990. *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Dell.
- MENDIS, N. K. G. 1993. *The questions of King Milianda: An abridgment of the Milindapañha*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- NYĀNAMOLI BHIKKHU, trans. 1976. *The path of purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Boston, MA: Shambala.
- PALMER, S. 1999. *Vision science*. Cambridge: MIT.
- POUSSIN, L. DE LA VALLÉE. 1971. *L'Abhidharmakosha*. Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises.
- RAHULA, W. 1980. *Le compendium de la super-doctrine d'Asaṅga*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient.
- TSONGKHAPA. 2002. *The great treatise on the stages of the path to enlightenment*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- WALLACE, A., and BHIKKHU BODHI. 2006. The nature of mindfulness and its role in Buddhist meditation. A correspondence between B. Alan Wallace and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Not published.

Georges Dreyfus, Jackson Professor of Religion, Hollander Hall, Room 357,
Department of Religion, Williams College, Williamstown, MA 01267, USA.
Email: gdreyfus@williams.edu

Copyright of Contemporary Buddhism is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.