

## The Construction of Mindfulness

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### Abstract

*Mindfulness is examined using the Abhidhamma system of classification of phenomena (dharmas) as found in the Pāli work Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha. In this model the mental factors constituting the aggregate of formations (saṅkhāra) are grouped so as to describe a layered approach to the practice of mental development. Thus all mental states involve a certain set of mental factors, while others are added as the training of the mind takes place. Both unwholesome and wholesome configurations also occur, and mindfulness turns out to be a rather advanced state of wholesome constructed experience. Wisdom, the prime transformative factor in Buddhist thought and practice, arises only under special conditions. This system is then contrasted with the different parsing of phenomena presented in the Sanskrit Abhidharmakośa, where both mindfulness and wisdom are counted among the universal factors, which provides a basis for an innatist model of development; this is then critiqued from a constructivist perspective.*

One of the most compelling aspects of the expansive and enduring Buddhist tradition is the sophisticated model of mind and body presented in the *Nikāyas* of the Pali Canon and systematized in both the Pali Abhidhamma literature of South Asia and the Sanskrit Abhidharma literature of Northwest India and beyond. The historical Buddha is surely the source of most of these ideas, though they were significantly developed by many others as time went by and the lore was taken up by new communities. The comprehensive analysis and description of experience offered in these teachings is of particular interest to modern thinkers, both because of its empirical underpinnings and its remarkable affinity with post-modern thought. Rooted in ancient yogic meditative practices and articulated with great intellectual precision, they offer a dynamic, process-oriented view of experience as a series of interdependent cognitive events arising and passing away each moment as the senses encounter incoming environmental data and the mind builds a world of meaning to interpret this information and respond to it both emotionally and behaviourally. Moreover, this system of thought goes beyond mere description to offer practical guidance for optimizing wellbeing, which is accomplished by overcoming the habitual compulsions deriving from the pleasure/pain reflex and by developing a greater working understanding of the nature of human experience.

This ancient knowledge about how the mind and body constructs experience and how a person can use this knowledge to attain greater health and happiness rests at the heart of the early Buddhist tradition, but was soon bypassed and relegated to a scholarly and meditative backwater as Buddhism turned in more popular, devotional, and culturally syncretic directions. It is gradually being rediscovered by the current generation of

scholars and teachers, and is of special concern to those in contemporary fields who study human experience and who have an interest in augmenting human wellbeing. Among these are cognitive scientists and psychologists, and the many others who overlap with these disciplines. Early Buddhist thought employs a crisply defined technical vocabulary that can be useful in identifying and untangling the thickets of subjective experience. It also offers a detailed examination of the mechanisms of attention, which may help in working towards a better definition of mindfulness and related mental states, and may even suggest a way of measuring levels of greater or lesser attention. Of particular value to the therapeutic agenda is the basic orientation of these teachings toward transformation and the alleviation of suffering, insofar as they track progress along a scale of change from a state of affliction toward one of profound wellbeing under any circumstances.

What most characterizes the model of mind and body expressed in early Buddhist literature is the breaking down of experience into its constituent phenomenological bytes, called *dhammas*, and then the organization and classification of these *dhammas* in various ways to clarify their definition and delineate their function as part of a complex interdependent system. Just as the natural world presents itself one way at a certain level of scale and another upon closer examination, so too Buddhist thought identifies the manner in which lived experience at the level of macro-construction differs significantly from its constituent processes as they are revealed under the close investigation of a concentrated mind. For example, it can be relatively easily shown, both experientially and neurologically, that what appears as an uninterrupted flow of continuous and coherent experience is actually a series of discreet sensory and mental events that arise and pass away in rapid succession, while the sense of continuity and narrative coherence is something supplied by higher level imaginative capabilities. At the heart of the Buddha's insight is the discrepancy between what appears to be the case, which is characterized as misapprehension or even delusion, and what is actually the case, which is called wisdom.

A central feature of this model that is seldom part of corresponding Western psychological models is the evaluative characterization of various *dhammas* as either wholesome or unwholesome. The word for this quality (*kusala/akusala* in Pali) might better be translated as healthy or unhealthy, insofar as it delineates not a moral standard or a normative definition of right and wrong as much as a description of what factors contribute to or detract from the result of wellbeing, the reduction of suffering and the capacity for understanding. The word also has the sense of skillful and unskillful, which means that the Buddhist practice of integrity (*sīla*) is regarded as a skill that can be learned, while even the most atrocious misbehaviour is evidence not of an evil nature but of a lack of understanding. The centrality of this ethical evaluation reveals the extent to which this entire system, both in its *Nikāya* origins and in its *Abhidhamma* extension, is meant as a tool for effecting personal psychological transformation rather than as an intellectual exercise of building doctrine.

Another important constituent of this system is the distinction made between the object of consciousness on one hand and the attitude or emotional involvement with that object on the other. *What* is cognized with consciousness is one thing; *how* it is cognized, that is to say with what quality of mind it is cognized, is something else. Thus many of

the *dhammas* enumerated in the Abhidhamma system correspond to what we might in another context call emotional attitudes, and this becomes important for understanding how meditation is regarded in early Buddhist thought. Part of meditation training has to do with learning to focus the mind on a particular object or on a series of emerging objects, but most of the training has more to do with cultivating particular qualities of mind by means of which the object is regarded. The technology of awareness is a matter of how the aggregate of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) interacts with the aggregate of material form (*rūpa*) as it manifests in the sense organs of the body and the sense objects of the environment; but the development of mindfulness and insight is rather a matter of how the aggregate of formations (*sankhāra*) co-arises with the other aggregates. This should become more clear as we examine the details of how experience is constructed.

### **The construction of experience**

Consciousness arises and passes away each moment because it is a process or an event that occurs rather than something that exists in any stable and identifiable way. It is characterized just by ‘knowing’ and thus can only arise in relationship with an object that is known and an organ by means of which the object is known. Six classes or modalities of consciousness are enumerated, which correspond to the five sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body) and the mind as sixth, as well to the five sense objects (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches) with thoughts as the sixth. The starting point or foundation of all experience is thus an episode of cognition in one or another of these six modes, which occurs again and again in a temporal series we generally refer to as the stream of consciousness. Since consciousness manifests in dependence upon organs and objects that are constantly changing, consciousness itself it always ‘moving and tottering, impermanent, changing, and becoming otherwise’ as one passage puts it.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, consciousness does not carry any characteristics other than the mere knowing or cognizing of an object, so all the textures and qualities of experience are supplied by other mental functions arising in various combinations. A detailed account of any given moment of experience thus consists of identifying first, which of the six modes of consciousness is manifesting (i.e. in dependence on which pair of organs and objects) and second, what associated *dhammas* or constituent factors are co-arising with consciousness to shape the overall experience. The method for describing mental states in this way is outlined in the *Nikāyas* and greatly refined in the *Abhidhamma* literature.

Rather than undertake a systematic review of this method, which would lead very far afield, let us focus on one particular aspect of this mapping of the *dhammas*, one that may prove helpful in understanding the definition and function of mindfulness. It has to do with the grouping of *dhammas* into several categories, delineating those that arise and pass away together in any given moment of consciousness. According to the Abhidhamma analysis summarized in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*,<sup>2</sup> seven mental factors arise together in all states of consciousness and are thus called *universals*; six other mental factors may or may not be present in any particular moment and are called *occasionals*. In addition to these two groupings, 39 other mental factors are classified as either *unwholesome* or *wholesome*, but factors from each group will never arise together with those of the other group—the two are mutually exclusive. Finally, these 39 states are

further broken down into four *unwholesome universals*, 10 *unwholesome occasionals*, 19 *wholesome universals* and six *wholesome occasionals*. We are thus left, generally speaking, with six different groupings of the mental factors that co-arise with consciousness to help give shape and texture to the attitude or emotion with which an object is cognized by consciousness. The whole range of individual configurations are a good deal more complex than this, but these six basic groupings yield a model that layers mental experience, so to speak, into six general levels of mental functioning, and it is these six levels that can help us understand how experience can be viewed as building upon itself to delineate a scale from lesser to greater degrees of conscious awareness.

## 1. The universals

The simplest manifestation of mind is characterized by the universal mental factors inherent in all moments of consciousness. It is not possible, according to the Abhidhamma, for consciousness to manifest with anything less than seven mental factors, but it may arise and pass away with only these seven and no more. Thus even in its most austere forms consciousness includes the mental functions of: *contact* between consciousness, an object and organ; a *feeling* tone that may be pleasant, unpleasant or neither; a *perception* of that object as something categorized symbolically according to prior experience; a *volition* or intentional response to the object that produces karma; a degree of *one-pointedness* or focus upon only one object at a time; a cohesive quality of *mental vitality* sustaining and supporting the interdependent functioning of the seven universal mental factors; and a function of *attention* that directs the associated factors toward the object as a rudder might steer a ship. The fact that these dharmas are always present means that they must describe even the most unreflective states of mind. We are thus always paying attention, for example, even if we are not aware we are doing so or even if we are paying attention to an object different than the one to which we would like to be attending. Similarly, the mind is always focused upon a single object, even in entirely untrained mind moments, though the object upon which it is unified might change moment to moment. If we were not capable of such baseline focus and attention, coherent mental experience would presumably not be possible.

## 2. The occasionals

In addition to these seven universal mental factors, six other factors are listed that may or may not arise either individually or as a whole. These include: *applied thought*, by means of which one deliberately place attention on a chosen object; *sustained thought*, the mental factor that enables one to hold the attention upon the object over multiple mind moments; *decision*, a state of confident and committed engagement with the object; *energy*, a factor that upholds and supports the others by bringing additional interest to bear; *joy*, a quality of uplifting enthusiasm; and *impulse-to-act*, a desire to act that is not rooted in greed or attachment but nonetheless impels the mind to initiate appropriate action. These are the factors called upon when we train the mind in meditation, since such training involves consciously directing attention to be placed upon and then held steadily upon a chosen object such as the breath. The steadiness of focus induces decision, requires energy, and often can result in joy, and impulse allows the meditator to shift attention from one part of the body to another, or toward the wellbeing of all

creatures above, below, and all around, without doing so in ways that engage desire or compulsion. These factors may not always manifest from the moment one sits down to meditate until the bell rings an hour later, just as a baseball player is in the game even when sitting in the dugout between innings or standing around in the outfield, but to the extent deliberate mental training is ever successful, even for a moment, some combination of these factors come in to play.

### **3. The universal unwholesomes**

The thing about the occasional factors just mentioned is that they are ethically variable, meaning they may be operative in wholesome or unwholesome mind states. All unwholesome mind moments will add four more factors: *delusion*, defined as not understanding some basic truths about experience, such as its impermanence, selflessness, and the causes of suffering; *restlessness*, a state of agitation that ruffles the mind like wind upon water; *suspension of conscience*, rendering momentarily inoperative the innate sense of self-respect that prevents us from serious wrongdoing; *suspension of respect*, turning off the innate sense of respect for the rights and opinions of others that also restrains our behaviour to stay within socially defined norms. This is the minimal set of mental factors that will be arising in the mind during any moment's misbehaviour, along of course with the seven universals. In the case of universals, it is all or nothing—when delusion is present the other three necessarily will be present as well. One interesting point about this analysis is that restlessness will always be unwholesome, suggesting that any practice that encourages one to relax and calm down is inherently healthy. It is a helpful and transformative practice in itself to reduce restlessness in the mind, since this will lead naturally to the elimination of its co-arising factor delusion, and will thus purge the moment of its most dangerous toxins and nudge it out of its unwholesomeness. Another point of some interest is the suggestion that conscience and respect function naturally as a sort of innate ethical immune system, protecting individuals and society from egregious wrongdoing, but that this is suppressed at those moments when one misbehaves.

### **4. The unwholesome occasionals**

While delusion can manifest in such a simple form as to involve only the four universal unwholesome factors, more often than not delusion is joined by either *greed* or *hatred*, the other two components of the three toxins. Yet greed and hatred are really opposite expressions of the same impulse, namely desire. Greed is the desire to want or like or remain attached to that which is pleasing or gratifying, while hatred is the desire to not want, not like, or otherwise ignore or destroy that which is displeasing or identified with pain. As such, greed and hatred are mutually exclusive and cannot arise together in the same mind moment. One can be deluded and greedy, deluded and hateful, or just plain deluded, but one will never be both greedy and hateful in the same instant. When this appears to be the case, the Abhidhamma models asserts, the two are simply alternating one after another in rapid succession, with the illusion of simultaneity being constructed at higher levels of mental organization. Other unwholesome factors that may arise with delusion and the other universals include *wrong view*, *conceit*, *envy*, *avarice*,

*worry, sloth, torpor* and *doubt*. One way of looking at these unwholesomes is as unique shades of colour mixed from the three primary colours of greed, hatred and delusion.

From the point of view of meditation practice, there is not much difference between the two groups of universal and occasional unwholesome factors—they are both serving as obstacles to mental serenity and clarity. They include, for example, the classical list of five hindrances (sense desire, ill-will, restlessness and remorse, sloth and torpor, doubt), mental factors that must be temporarily abandoned in order for the mind to reach entry level concentration and begin the process of consciousness attenuation known as the absorptions (*jhāna*). For our present purposes it suffices to say that little progress toward transformation can occur while any unwholesome state is arising in experience, and learning how to abandon such states is a fundamental part of the path. For example, while it is important to be able to notice the arising and passing away of all mental states, noticing annoyance (a mild form of hatred—not liking what is happening) with an attitude of annoyance will only reinforce the quality of annoyance. Similarly, avoiding, repressing, or otherwise pushing away the annoyance will only ensure that it comes back again later with greater urgency or intensity. The middle way between accepting and rejecting the experience of annoyance is to notice it, see it for the unwholesome factor that it is, and gently release one's hold upon it. All unwholesome states need to be similarly neutralized, and will just proliferate if met with other unwholesome states.

## **5. The wholesome universals**

Altogether there are 19 mental factors that arise together in every wholesome mind moment, and these comprise a remarkable list. *Mindfulness* is one of them, which is regarded as a particular attitude or emotional stance toward the object of awareness. One cognizes an object with a quality of attention shaped by mindfulness, that is to say with presence of mind, non-forgetfulness, and a certain stability of focus. As a universal wholesome factor, mindfulness is exclusive of restlessness, delusion and all the other unwholesome states, and cannot co-arise with these in the same moment. It is also a mental state that arises over and above basic levels of attention, intention and one-pointedness, and that arises over and above factors that help train the mind, such as applying and sustaining attention on a consciously chosen object of awareness and generating energy or joy. The factors that co-arise with mindfulness under all circumstances also help define it and refine how it functions in the mind. *Non-greed* and *non-hatred* help clarify that mindful attention neither favours nor opposes the object, but rather it expresses an attitude of *equanimity*. This is where modern definitions of mindfulness get the sense of not judging the object but of accepting it just as it is. Also arising with mindfulness are the twin guardians of *conscience* and *respect*, which were suspended in all unwholesome states, as well as *confidence* or faith, construed as a basic trust that comes from the dispersal of the toxins. These six factors arising with mindfulness are joined by six others that can be taken in a two-fold sense of applying to both consciousness itself and to the associated mental factors: *tranquility*, *lightness*, *malleability*, *wieldiness*, *proficiency*, and *rectitude*. These can be seen as qualities of mindfulness, further shaping the attitude with which an object will be cognized by consciousness when it becomes an object of mindful awareness, rather than just an object of awareness. All 19 of these wholesome universal factors will arise and pass away as a

group, not only when one practices insight meditation formally but at any time one has a wholesome thought, performs a wholesome action, or speaks a wholesome word. As such, mindfulness is a non-extraordinary mind state which may come up frequently, though mindfulness meditation involves its deliberate cultivation in a continuous series of mind moments.

## **6. The wholesome occasionals**

The final set of factors to consider are those that build upon the universal wholesome factors. There are six of these, which can only arise if the previous 19 are present but which may or may not arise together with one another. Three of these are elements of the eightfold path, namely *right speech*, *right action* and *right livelihood*. It is a bit hard to gather how these act as mental factors, since they seem to be descriptive of behavioural patterns rather than psychological states, but they are described as being present in the mind in any moment when one deliberately abstains from misbehaving in one of the three modes. The next two are *compassion* and *appreciative joy*, two of the four *brahma-vihāras* or illimitable mind states (the other two being loving kindness and equanimity, both on the list of wholesome universals). This means that one can be simply mindful, a state which includes a benevolent and even-minded attitude toward an object, or one can also be mindful with compassion or with appreciative joy, which adds something to mindfulness. Compassion adds an empathic response to suffering, while appreciative joy adds an empathic response to good fortune or happiness. And finally one can also add *wisdom* as a wholesome occasional factor. Wisdom in Buddhist thought is a quality of understanding the nature of experience, of seeing clearly the impermanence, interdependence, and impersonality of it all, as well as seeing the origin and cessation of suffering as it manifests moment to moment in experience. It is only when the wisdom factor arises that insight meditation really occurs, for while mindfulness can regard an object with balanced objectivity, it is understanding that is ultimately transformative. As the matter is expressed in one metaphor, just as a reaper will grasp a handful of barley in one hand and a sickle in the other, one takes hold of the mind with attention and cuts off its defilements with wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

## **A model of layered attention**

With the data on the table we may now step back and see what pattern emerges from this analysis of experience. Whatever the number of possible combinations of mental factors mapped out by this model, it seems helpful to make use of the six groupings outlined above and postulate that five (if we conflate the unwholesome factors into a single group) levels or layers of experience can be identified. Each of these represents a general type of mental functioning whose particular details might be almost infinitely variable. Every moment of consciousness is going to arise in correspondence with one or another of the six pairs of organs and objects (eye and forms; ear and sounds, etc.), but then each will be additionally augmented by some combination of mental factors following along the lines of these groupings. Depending on what mental factors arise in conjunction with consciousness, awareness of the object will be directed, shaped and otherwise characterized each moment by the particular combination of mental factors.

In its most basic configuration, the mind has enough support from the seven universal mental factors to be capable of cognizing any object (utilizing *contact*, *attention*, and *mental vitality*), holding the attention steadily upon it (with *volition* and *one-pointedness*), and understanding its features (*perception*) and textures (*feeling*) sufficiently to yield coherent experience. As long as one is not dead, in a coma, or in deep sleep, at least this much mind is functioning at all times. Thus even when daydreaming, multitasking, or otherwise thinking in an entirely unstructured way, these factors always cooperate to help guide and support consciousness as it cognizes an object by means of an organ. Each moment the process arises, passes away, and arises again, with all seven factors working together to construct meaning around the incoming torrent of stimuli. As moments string together into a stream of consciousness, it can feel like we are deliberately choosing to shift attention from one object to another and thus are directing awareness, but in fact most of the time what comes next in the series is conditioned by causes that lie entirely outside the scope of conscious awareness. In any given string of free association, for example, one image suggests another in ways that are habitually conditioned, and we can do all sorts of actions and behaviours of which we are entirely unaware. Paradoxically, even though consciousness is always occurring, we may well be entirely not conscious that this is the case.

At a second level of experience, built upon the foundation of the first, functions we identify with conscious awareness begin to come into play. When the mind is deliberately placed upon a particular object (using *applied thought*) rather than allowed to drift there 'on its own,' or held deliberately upon a chosen object (using *sustained thought*) even though it may be inclined to wander elsewhere, we are imposing some control on the process and it is no longer entirely conditioned by unconscious forces. As factors such as *decision*, *energy*, *joy*, and *impulse-to-act* are added, the sense of conscious engagement becomes amplified. It is at this level of mental function that mental training takes place, and the heightened concentration that comes from applying and sustaining attention in particular ways is useful to learning all sorts of skills, both wholesome and unwholesome. Training at this level of mind is where most meditation, especially for recent initiates to the practice, takes place. Instead of allowing the mind to wander wherever it will, one attempts to bring and then hold attention on the physical sensations associated with the breath, for example, or upon a phrase of loving kindness. Or, one may sanction the free and easy wandering of the mind among various different objects, but try to bring heightened awareness by applying attention with enhanced energy to following its series of manifestations. Because it takes effort to direct the mind in particular ways, this sort of mental training can feel like hard work much of the time.

The third and fourth level of mental function might best be viewed as two aspects of the same process, insofar as both deal with the arising and passing away of unwholesome states. Whether it manifests as pure *delusion*, such as what occurs when one is confused or dazed, or whether it includes the primal driving forces of *greed* and *hatred*, unwholesome mind states are worked with in Buddhist practice in similar ways. When they are strong we are swept away by their force and act out their emotions in behaviour that is harmful to ourselves and others. Much of the time we are not even consciously aware that we are in their grasp, in which case the universal factors are co-arising with the unwholesome factors without the participation of the occasional factors. Other times

the occasional factors are present and we are acting in harmful ways even though we know they are harmful. One of the effects of the three poisons in such states is that we do not really care that we may be acting badly and are even enthralled by the power and gratification of such emotion. On still other occasions we might bring attention to bear upon the unwholesome states by exercising applied and sustained thought, but these are now in the service of the unwholesome state and are co-opted by delusion. One can thus be consciously aware of hatred, for example, but such awareness is not going to be transformative and may only serve to perpetuate the hatred.

It is at the next level that the transformative power of mindfulness comes to bear upon experience. As mentioned above, mindfulness and its associated factors shape the awareness of an object in very different ways than mere attention. Mindfulness is not just heightened attention, but is attention that has become confident, benevolent, balanced, and fundamentally wholesome. As such it builds not only upon the seven universal mental factors, as do all mind states, but it also builds upon the occasional factors. Basic attention (included among the universals) is augmented by deliberate conscious attention (brought in by the occasionals), and is then further refined and enhanced by mindful attention, which is always a wholesome universal. For example, one breathes all the time and may or may not be aware of the fact because of a range of various conditions. When distracted by something else we lose track of the breath; when unable to breathe or when winded we attend naturally to the breath; but in these cases our attention is ‘stumbling upon’ the breath as if by chance (though according to Buddhist thought there is always a cause for attention going where it does, whether one knows it or not). With meditation training, one may deliberately direct attention to the breath, but the quality of this attention may still be quite ordinary, especially when it phases in and out as the mind wanders all over the field of experience. Such directed attention may also be present in unwholesome mind states, such as when one breathes heavily in a rage or in the process of committing a terrible crime. But when the wholesome form of attention manifests, namely mindfulness, the breath is viewed in a different light, is held with a different touch, is cognized with a different quality of mind. Now the emotional tone, the intentional stance, the attitude with which one beholds the object is rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, which functionally excludes from the mind their opposites, the three poisons, and even though the object of awareness is something as ordinary as the sensations of breathing, the moment is profoundly transformative. Shifting from the breath to a more challenging topic, in the case where someone who is angry is able to bring attention to the anger, and then further is able to bring mindfulness to the anger, then the anger has become a mental object, an echo from the preceding mind moments, and is no longer functioning as the attitude driving the mind. One cannot be angry and mindful at the same moment, so at whatever point true mindfulness arises the actual anger is already banished and it is only a relic of that angry state that is acting as the object of consciousness. If the wholesome attention can be sustained moment after moment, the entire stream of consciousness becomes purified of its naturally-arising toxins and wholesome dispositions are reinforced while their unwholesome counterparts atrophy. Mindfulness of unwholesome states is transformative precisely because the unwholesome quality of awareness has been replaced with a wholesome attitude.

The final grouping to consider is the wholesome occasional factors, which arise building upon the foundation of the wholesome universals. Here we meet with wisdom, which according to this model does not arise automatically with mindfulness. It is possible, in other words, to experience purification of the mind stream through mindful meditation without necessarily understanding with wisdom the nature of experience. Mindfulness practice ripens into insight meditation when one sees directly such things as impermanence, suffering and selflessness in the arising and passing away of the objects of awareness. Once again, it does not matter what the object is; it is the way of understanding the object that is important here. Wisdom in this model is itself as impermanent and tenuous as every other element of the mind and body. It arises under certain conditions, and cannot be sustained if those conditions change even slightly. One tends to experience wisdom in brief glimpses, therefore, which may be repeated more often as one's skills increase.

### **Meditation as process**

What this model provides is a layered way of understanding what happens when one sits down to practice meditation. Much of the time there is only a rudimentary form of attention manifesting, as the mind registers changes in the environment, such as sounds, or moves from one association to another in a natural and ordinary way. The mind is constantly shifting its attention from one object to another, and one can guide this process somewhat by exercising volition and attention to encourage engaging the mind with one thing rather than another. Most forms of popular self-development strategies work at this basic level of *changing the mind* (1) by guiding attention from one thing to another. What Buddhists would call *training the mind* (2) begins as the commitment to cultivating attention in a more directed and deliberate way. One becomes gradually more adept at placing the attention on a chosen object and maintaining it upon that object for some period of time. If one is practicing concentration meditation the attention might even remain steady upon an object for a considerable length of time, or might be capable of focusing well on a long series of changing objects. While doing any of this, it is natural that unwholesome mind states will arise and pass away in experience, both deluded states with greed and hatred and states that are merely deluded. One will try to abandon these as they are noticed, either right away or after a long ride on a train of thought that carries one well down the track. Abandoning such toxic mind states after they have arisen and guarding the mind from the arising of such toxic states are important Buddhist practices for *purifying the mind* (3). At other moments, when these toxins do not manifest, mindfulness may arise with its host of associated factors, and this too will either pass away quickly or be sustainable for multiple mind moments. Mindfulness practice serves the function of *transforming the mind* (4) by simultaneously blocking all unwholesome states and developing and strengthening wholesome states. And when mindfulness does become steady enough, the conditions ripen for wisdom also to arise and greatly magnify the transformative effect of mindfulness, although it may collapse just as rapidly as it arose. Wisdom has the function of *liberating the mind* (5), both in the short-term, as the unconscious effects of delusion are neutralized, and in the long-term, as the latent disposition toward greed, hatred and delusion are expunged from the mind altogether and are no longer capable of arising.

In this way of looking at things, the mind is intrinsically neither polluted nor pristine. It is capable of functioning at a basic level of awareness that includes the six internal and six external sense bases, the six corresponding modalities of consciousness, and all five of the aggregates. Over and above this, it can add either wholesome or unwholesome mental factors (both of which are volition formations or *sankhāras*) in various combinations, which will serve to clarify or pollute the resulting quality of awareness. Mental training in general, and the development of mindfulness and wisdom in particular, will optimize the functioning of the mind, and will culminate in its transformation such that unwholesome states can no longer occur at all and the mind will become entirely liberated from its suffering. The process unfolds something like the classical image of the lotus, whose roots are in the mud, growing through the water and ultimately opening its petals to the sky.

### **Abhidhamma and Abhidharma**

All that has been said so far is from the perspective of the Pali Abhidhamma, those texts that emerged and stabilized in the Southern Buddhist schools of South and Southeast Asia. These texts include such works as the seven books of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* and such later manuals as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. There is also a parallel Sanskrit *Abhidharma* tradition, expressed in texts that developed in Northern Buddhist schools of North West India and elsewhere. Here too we find seven (somewhat different) books of an *Abhidharma-piṭaka* and later compilations such as the *Abhidharmakośa*. For the most part there is a great deal of similarity and agreement between these two textual, meditational, and philosophical traditions, which can clearly be seen as two parallel strands of development from a more or less common source. On the matter at hand, however, namely the classification of the *dharmas* into groupings of universal and occasional wholesome and unwholesome factors, there is a very interesting divergence between the two traditions. This discrepancy is not trivial, and speaks to the very core of the different models of practice and liberation the two approaches take.

In the *Abhidharmakośa*, the mental factors of *mindfulness* and *wisdom* are considered among the universal mental factors, and thus arise and pass away in every single mind moment.<sup>4</sup> They are presumably eclipsed or over-ridden by unwholesome factors, but nevertheless underlie such mental states. This model is thus in line with the later Buddhist view of the mind as already awakened, inherently wise, but with its wisdom habitually occluded by greed, hatred and delusion. The practice becomes one of uncovering the originally pure nature of mind rather than of building up wisdom upon the prepared ground of mindfulness.

The implications of this distinction are huge, and clearly go beyond the scope of what can be said here. Suffice it to say that including mindfulness and wisdom among the universal factors provides a rationale for the so-called ‘innatist’ model of later Buddhist tradition, as contrasted to the ‘constructivist’ model favoured by the earlier tradition (see Dunne 2011). A natural historical question to emerge is whether the philosophical changes of the Abhidharma system preceded or postdated the emergence of the innatist model of awakening. And the doctrinal question that naturally arises is whether a new approach to practice led to revisions of the Abhidharma system, or whether the patterns

laid down by the Abhidharma paved the way for a different orientation toward practice. Again, these questions need to be pursued elsewhere, though it might not be surprising if it turned out these two had a chicken and egg relationship. Let us conclude here with a brief reflection upon the innatist approach from the perspective of the constructivist model outlined above.

### **A constructivist critique of non-duality**

From the earlier constructionist perspective of the Nikayas and the Abhidhamma, the whole issue of dual or nondual experience is somewhat puzzling. The *Nikāyas* tell us that every cognitive event depends not upon a duality between subject and object, but upon a trinity of sense organ, sense object and consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The coming together of these three constitutes contact (*phassa/sparśa*), the starting point of any episode of knowing. If there is indeed a duality in early Buddhist thought, it is not one of subject and object but of organ and object. The events cognized by cognition are the collisions between the inner and outer world, the interaction of stimuli such as light and sound waves (etc.) upon the sensitive matter of retina and inner ear (etc.) that translate these modulations into the neuronal activity we call consciousness. The knowing of an object by means of an organ is not the same as the subject-object relation. Consciousness is not a subject, but an activity, a process, an event recurring moment after moment. It is a relationship between organs of sensation and thought on one hand, and objects of sensation and thought on the other. It is a natural interface between the sensitive matter of the body's sense receptors (which would include the brain) and the data contained in the surrounding (and internal) environment that is mediated by mental states of knowing. This mentality is likely an emergent property of materiality, but the virtual world constructed of this mental activity presents as a robust phenomenology of experience.

The experience of arising and passing phenomena do indeed involve the arising and passing away of moments of consciousness, but these do not in themselves qualify as a subject. The subject is constructed elsewhere in the model, at the point where desire is generated toward the objects of experience. By liking or not liking the object, a subject who likes or does not like the object is created. It is craving, manifesting as clinging, that leads to the becoming of a self (*atta-bhāva*), and it is only when one has become a self, a subject, there can then also be suffering. The one who craves becomes the one who suffers, as pointed out in the Second Noble Truth. And as the Third Noble Truth indicates, the cessation of craving will lead to the cessation of suffering by means of the cessation of the making of a self (*ahaṃ-kāra*). The duality to which non-dual Buddhist thought seems to be pointing, therefore, is the duality between the object and the subject who likes or does not like it, rather than between the object and the knowing of the object. That knowing, the mere functioning of consciousness, is an impersonal event; the liking or disliking of it is a personal construction. From earliest times, in this way of looking at it, the Buddha was always directing his students toward non-dual experience, but this had nothing to do with the relationship between consciousness and the object cognized by it. It was only about the object and the illusory sense of being a person who stands in relation to it. It is then entirely perplexing to discover that the solution to this 'problem' in later tradition is to de-couple consciousness from its object and aspire to an experience of consciousness that takes no object. This seems to preserve the subject at the

expense of the object, while the entire point of the early teaching is to understand the fundamentally illusory nature of the subject and thus allow the object to be known with consciousness as it really is (*yathā-bhūta*).

If the non-dual experience has to do with the dissolution of the subject-object relation, then according to Abhidhamma analysis it must refer to the elimination of the mistaken view of self (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*).<sup>6</sup> This eliminates one dichotomy, between phenomena as they really are and the illusory sense of there being a separate person to whom the experience of the phenomena belongs. But it leaves intact the dichotomy between the organs and objects of experience, because each only exists as an interaction with the other and each therefore requires the other by definition. Cognition thus remains, even after the person who experiences the cognition is vanquished, as the mere view it really is.

It seems as if somewhere along the line a conflation occurred between consciousness and the view of self, insofar as consciousness is identified as the subject in a subject-object relation. I think the entire concept of subject-object duality is an issue inherited by Buddhist thinkers from non-Buddhist schools of Indian philosophy, where the issue is simplified by the real existence of a soul. In Hindu thought, consciousness (*cit*) is inextricably bound up with real existence (*sat*), so it is taken for granted that where there is something known (*grāhya*) there must be a knower of it (*grāhaka*). But the Buddha sought to purge his language of all agent nouns, and would likely regard any reference to a 'knower of the known' to be fundamentally deluded.<sup>7</sup> A soul in relation to anything constitutes a duality, and the liberation of the soul from anything results in a non-dual state. In this binary environment of self and other it is natural to explore the subject-object distinction philosophically, and it seems Buddhist thinkers were drawn in to this discourse. But in the non-binary world of the non-orthodox Indic teachings, such as Buddhism, where consciousness is seen to be a multiply-conditioned natural phenomenon, the situation is more complex. The interdependent arising and cessation of consciousness (along with its corresponding organs and objects and the other four aggregates) unfolding each moment is one thing, while the construction of an illusory sense of being the person to which it is all happening is something else again.

So I would entirely agree that Buddhist insight has to do with experiencing non-duality of subject and object, but would suggest that this is accomplished when the sense of self is lost, either briefly, as in the short-term loss of self occurring in any peak experience, or unshakeably, as with the awakening of a Buddha. This sort of non-dual understanding is hardly an innovation of the fourth century, however, and has been an intrinsic part of the Buddhist message from its earliest times.

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Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* 35:93.

<sup>2</sup> Bodhi (1993). In what follows the impulse to list each of the following technical terms along with their Pali and Sanskrit names is replaced with a simple English rendering. See Bodhi (1993) for the Pali and Pruden (1991) for the Sanskrit. See also Olendzki (2010, 163ff).

<sup>3</sup> *Milindapañho* 2:1.8.

<sup>4</sup> *Abhidharmakośa* 2:24 (Pruden, 1991, 189–90). The universals are here called *mahābhūmikas*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* 48: ‘This is the way leading to the origination of personality: One regards [all experience] thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my self.” This is the way leading to the cessation of personality: One regards [all experience] thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” Notice the functioning of consciousness remains unchanged.

<sup>7</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:12: ‘Venerable sir, who makes contact...who feels...who craves...?’ ‘Not a valid question. I do not say “One makes contact...one feels...one craves...” If one should ask me, “Venerable sir, with what as condition does contact come to be...with what as condition does feeling come to be...with what as condition does craving come to be?” —this would be a valid question.’ See also, e.g., *Visuddhimagga* 16:90: *kāriko na...vijjati; gamako na vijjati*...etc. (a do-er is not found; a go-er is not found).