

# a MINDFUL balance

What did the Buddha really mean by “mindfulness?” **B. ALAN WALLACE** describes how misunderstanding the term can have implications for your practice.

Artwork by Sohan Qadri

Buddhist scholar and teacher B. Alan Wallace is a prolific author and translator of Buddhist texts. With a B.A. in both physics and the philosophy of science from Amherst College and a Ph.D. in religious studies from Stanford University, he devotes much of his time combining his interests in the study of Buddhist philosophical and contemplative traditions and their relationship to modern science.

Wallace is founder and president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, in Santa

Barbara, California. Here he speaks in depth with *Tricycle* about what he considers an essential but widely misunderstood Buddhist practice: mindfulness meditation. Wallace argues that our poor understanding of the practice has profound implications for our meditation practice, and may very well draw us from the ultimate fruit of Buddhist practice—liberation from suffering and its underlying causes.

The interview was conducted by email over the course of several months in 2007.

ALAN WALLACE

interview

For the past several months you've been in dialogue with many Buddhist teachers on the topic of mindfulness. What prompted you to focus on this topic? For years I've been puzzled by the discrepancies between the descriptions of mindfulness given by many modern Vipassana teachers and psychologists who rely on them, on the one hand, and the definitions of mindfulness we find in traditional Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist literature on the other. When I first noticed this disparity about thirty years ago, I thought perhaps it was due to differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. But the more I looked into this, the more it appeared to me that traditional Theravada and Mahayana sources are largely in accord with each other, and it was the modern accounts of mindfulness that departed from both traditions.

**In what ways do the modern accounts differ?** While mindfulness (*sati*) is often equated with bare attention, my conversations with—and recent studies of works by—the learned monks Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Analayo, and Rupert Gethin, president of the Pali Text

Society, led me to conclude that bare attention corresponds much more closely to the Pali term *manasikara*, which is commonly translated as “attention” or “mental engagement.” This word refers to the initial split seconds of the bare cognizing of an object, before one begins to recognize, identify, and conceptualize, and in Buddhist accounts it is not regarded as a wholesome mental factor. It is ethically neutral. The primary meaning of *sati*, on the other hand, is recollection, non-forgetfulness. This includes *retrospective* memory of things in the past, *prospectively* remembering to do something in the future, and present-centered recollection in the sense of maintaining unwavering attention to a present reality. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness, so mindfulness applied to the breath, for instance, involves continuous, unwavering attention to the respiration. Mindfulness may be used to *sustain* bare attention (*manasikara*), but nowhere do traditional Buddhist sources *equate* mindfulness with such attention.

**Does the Buddha ever mention the term *manasikara* in his mindfulness instructions?** Not that I know of. The term figures most prominently in Abhidhamma-

based treatises on Buddhist psychology. In the Buddha's practical instructions on both *samatha* (tranquility meditation) and *vipassana* (insight meditation), the terms *sati* and *sampajanna* appear most often. *Sampajanna* is usually translated from the Pali as "clear comprehension," but this type of awareness always has a reflexive quality: It invariably entails a monitoring of the state of one's body or mind, sometimes in relation to one's environment. For this reason, I prefer to translate *sampajanna* as "introspection," which here entails discerning observation not only of one's mind but of one's physical and verbal activities as well.

**What are some of the pitfalls of viewing meditation simply as a process of bare attention?** When mindfulness is equated with bare attention, it can easily lead to the misconception that the cultivation of mindfulness has nothing to do with ethics or with the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and the attenuation of unwholesome states. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Pali Abhidhamma, where mindfulness is listed as a wholesome mental factor, it is not depicted as bare attention, but as a mental factor that clearly distinguishes wholesome from unwholesome mental states and behavior. And it is used to support wholesome states and counteract unwholesome states.

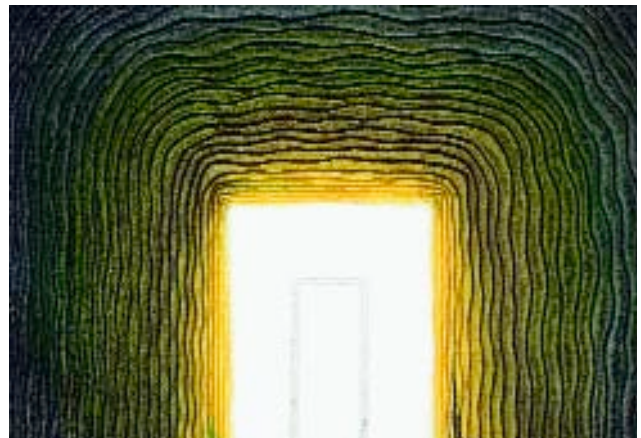
**What, then, is the role of bare attention?** The cultivation of bare attention is valuable in many ways, and there's a rapidly growing body of research on its benefits for both psychological and physiological disorders. But it's incorrect to equate that with mindfulness, and an even greater error to think that's all there is to *vipassana*. If that were the case, all the Buddha's teachings on ethics, *samadhi* (highly focused attention), and wisdom would be irrelevant. All too often, people who assume that bare attention is all there is to meditation reject the rest of Buddhism as clap-trap and mumbo-jumbo. The essential teachings are dismissed rather than one's own preconceptions.

**A frequent claim is that bare awareness will automatically prevent unwholesome thoughts from arising. Is there any basis for this notion in the texts?** Bare awareness as calm, nonreactive awareness of one's meditative object plays a crucial role in *samatha* practice, which alleviates such afflictive mental states

as craving, aversion, dullness, agitation, and doubt. There are also many accounts in Buddhist texts of people gaining profound, liberating insights through what appears to be bare attention. Perhaps the most well-known case is that of the wandering ascetic Bahiya. After becoming a highly accomplished contemplative, he recognized that he still hadn't achieved liberation, so he sought out the guidance of the Buddha, who told him, "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself." And Bahiya immediately achieved liberation.

We could easily conclude from this that bare attention is all that is needed in insight meditation. But we must remember that Bahiya's case was exceptional. He had already achieved a very high level of spiritual maturation before he met the Buddha, so these quintessential instructions were all he needed to completely purify his mind of all mental afflictions. For the rest of us, the rich diversity of theories and practices in Buddhism can be a

*Purusha III*, 1999, ink and dye on paper, 20 x 29 inches



great aid. Bare awareness can play an important role in this, and on occasion it may indeed prevent unwholesome thoughts from arising. But if we stick to bare attention alone, it can also prevent wholesome thoughts from arising! For example, meditations for the cultivation of the four sublime virtues of lovingkindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity are all practiced with mindfulness but not bare attention. Bare attention is not a complete practice, and by itself it can be helpful and yet very limiting.

**Do the differing definitions of mindfulness have any practical bearing? Or is this just a semantic issue?**

It's far more than a semantic issue. In common usage the English term *mindfulness* simply means to be aware, or heedful. *Sati* has a much richer connotation, so those wishing to practice Buddhist meditation are well advised to gain as clear an understanding of this and other related terms as they can, based on the most authoritative sources they can find. Otherwise, Buddhist meditation quickly devolves into a vague kind of "be here now" mentality, in which the

quality, which is crucial when closely practicing *satipatthana* (the Four Applications of Mindfulness)—mindfulness of the body, feelings, thoughts, and other phenomena. As Buddhaghosa comments that mindfulness should be seen as a post set in its object, and as a gatekeeper guarding the doors of perception. On the basis of this classic, authoritative account, we can easily see why mindfulness is essential for *samatha* and *vipassana* in particular and for spiritual practice in general. Traditionally, *samatha* is the primary method for cultivating mindfulness, while in the practice of

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extraordinary depth and richness of Buddhist meditative traditions are lost.

**Would it help to standardize the meaning of mindfulness?** Out of respect for the integrity of each tradition, it would be a mistake to force them all into the same mold. It's important to be sensitive to differences among different schools. But insofar as the discourses attributed to the Buddha and the major commentaries agree on the meaning of mindfulness, this should be recognized by Buddhists of all schools.

In his classic fifth-century work *The Path of Purification*, Buddhaghosa, the most authoritative commentator in the Theravada tradition, begins his explanation of this topic by stating that it is by means of mindfulness that we are able to recall things or events in the past, which echoes the Buddha's definition of this term. Its characteristic, Buddhaghosa writes, is "not floating," in that the mind is closely engaged with the chosen object of attention. Its property is "not losing," indicating that mindfulness enables us to maintain our attention without forgetfulness. Its manifestation is "guarding" or being "face to face with the object," implying that "the rope of mindfulness" holds the attention firmly to its chosen object, whether it is a relatively stable, single object or a continuum of interrelated events. Its basis is "strong noting," suggesting its discerning

*vipassana* one applies mindfulness and wisdom (*panna*) to body, mind, feelings, and other phenomena.

In its psychological role as recollection, *sati* is an ordinary mental faculty we use in daily life. Some of the exercises in *satipatthana*, such as contemplating the anatomical parts of the body, can't possibly be done with bare attention—for example, as *satipatthana* is used in the practice of mentally scanning bodily sensations. In all cases, mindfulness as it is cultivated in spiritual practice is applied with discerning intelligence, often viewing phenomena within the contexts of Buddhist categories such as the five aggregates. This is evident in the Buddha's primary discourse on *satipatthana*, which goes far beyond bare attention.

**What's the difference between mindfulness and right mindfulness? Is there such a thing as wrong mindfulness?** A sniper hiding in the grass, waiting to shoot his enemy, may be quietly aware of whatever arises with each passing moment. But because he is intent on killing, he is practicing wrong mindfulness. In fact, what he's practicing is bare attention without an ethical component. Generally speaking, right mindfulness has to be integrated with *sampajanna*—again, introspection involving clear comprehension—and it is only when these two work together that right mindfulness can fulfill its intended purpose. Specifically, in the

practice of the Four Applications of Mindfulness, right mindfulness has to occur in the context of the full Noble Eightfold Path: For example, it must be guided by right view, motivated by right intention, grounded in ethics, and be cultivated in conjunction with right effort. Without right view or right intention, one could be practicing bare attention without its ever developing into right mindfulness. So bare attention doesn't by any means capture the complete significance of *vipassana*, but represents only the initial phase in the meditative development of right mindfulness.

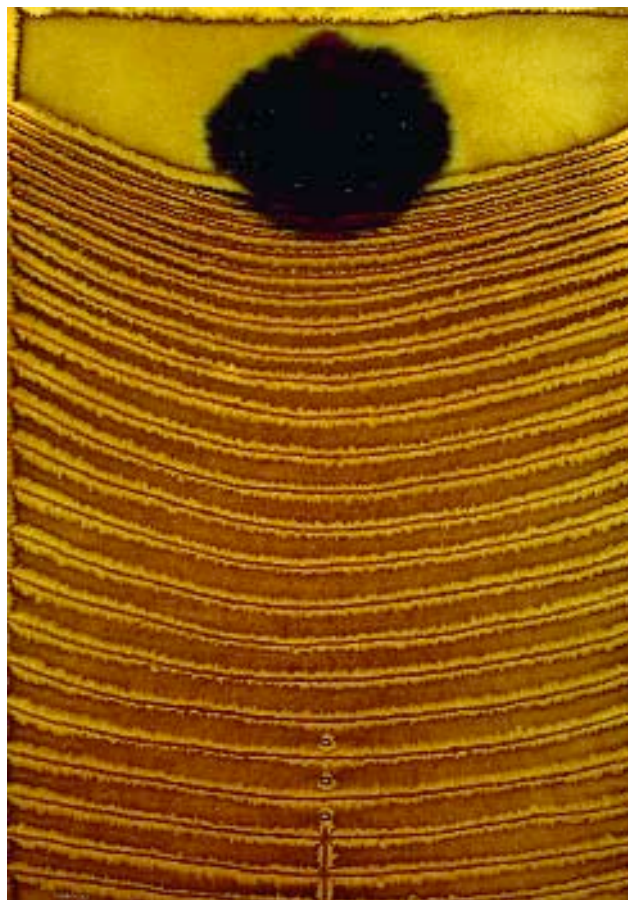
**There's a tendency in some circles to favor vipassana practice over samatha practice. Can you say something about that?**

The term *samatha*, variously translated as "tranquility" or "meditative quiescence," refers to a wide range of practices for the purpose of achieving *samadhi*, or highly focused attention, or single-pointed concentration. Both mindfulness and introspection are integral to all *samatha* practices, and the concentrated awareness one achieves through such practice may be applied to any kind of object, small or large, simple or complex, relatively stable or changing. *Samatha* practice is often overlooked or at best marginalized in many contemporary schools of Buddhism, including Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhism. With its emphasis on "sudden enlightenment," the Zen tradition doesn't teach *samatha* as a separate practice. Rather, it's incorporated into the *zazen* practice of "just sitting" and into meditations on *koans*. This same trend has recently carried over into the modern Vipassana tradition, which de-emphasizes *samatha*. But in traditional Theravada and Mahayana literature, *samatha* practices take a central role in the familiar triad of ethics, mental balance (the broader meaning of *samadhi*), and wisdom. Moreover, the array of Buddhist practices taught in the category of *samadhi* covers much more than just developing single-pointed concentration. These practices are aimed at cultivating exceptional states of mental health and balance, and all insight meditations are optimally practiced on that basis. Without mindfulness, mental balance cannot be developed. And without the stability and vividness of attention achieved through *samatha* practice, Buddhist wisdom practices are bound to be impaired by mental agitation, dullness, and other

hindrances. Ethics and mental balance support each other, as do *samatha* and *vipassana*.

**Mindfulness as a practice is normally associated with the Theravada tradition. What role does it play in Vajrayana practice?**

Mindfulness, as the faculty of sustaining continuous attention on a chosen object, is indispensable for all kinds of meditation. In the many visualization exercises included in Vajrayana meditations, mindfulness enables one to sustain such imagery with stability and clarity. Vajrayana also includes



*Yantra III*, 2007, ink and dye on paper, 39 x 27 inches

Mahamudra and Dzogchen meditations, and here, once again, stable, luminous, nonreactive attention is strongly emphasized, as it is in Zen. But the basis for these wisdom practices is still the cultivation of mental balance, including calm, vivid attention.

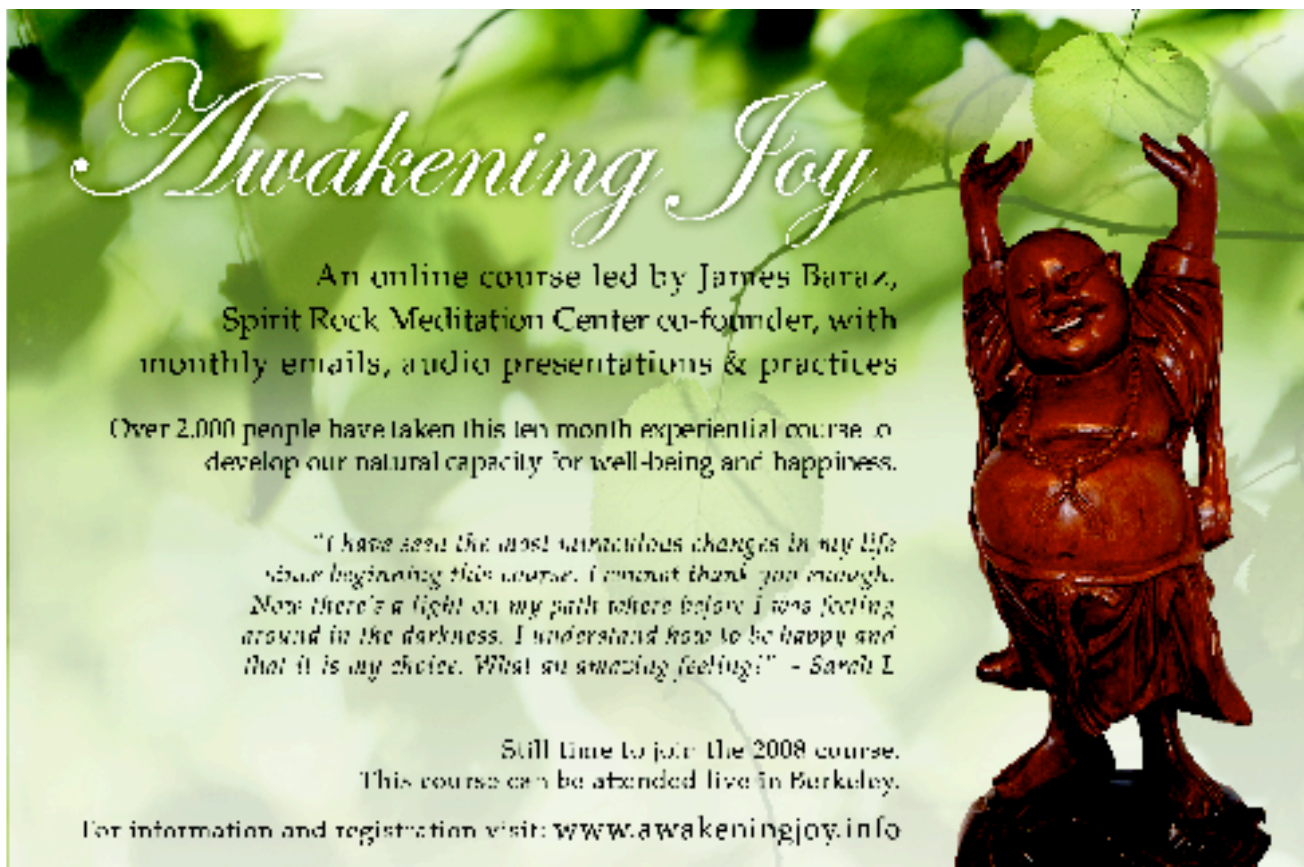
In authentic Mahamudra practice, for instance, one first trains in the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths, including the practices of ethics, mental balance, and wisdom. Then one ventures into the Mahayana teachings, especially those on the Bodhisattva ideal, the *(continued on page 109)*

(continued from page 63) “Perfection of Wisdom” explanations of emptiness and dependent origination, and the Buddha-nature. On that basis, one is initiated into Vajrayana Buddhism, with its own unique practices for transmuting one’s body, speech, and mind into the body, speech, and mind of a buddha. Finally, one is trained in the specific view, meditation, and way of life of the Mahamudra tradition. The meditation entails a kind of radical “not-doing,” in which one rests in unstructured awareness, releasing grasping onto all kinds of sensory appearances, memories, and thoughts. As a result of such practice, all experiences gradually arise as aids to one’s spiritual awakening, and finally all phenomena are perceived as pure expressions of primordial consciousness, or Buddha-nature.

The first phase of Dzogchen meditation, known as the “breakthrough,” is very similar to Mahamudra, and at first glance they may seem identical to the bare attention practiced in the modern Vipassana tradition and in Zen. But as we’ve noted in the discussion of right mindfulness, the context of one’s practice is

crucial, and methods that appear the same on the surface may have deep, underlying differences. Traditionally, Zen monks, for example, would commonly train in ethics and study the great treatises of their tradition for years before they would devote themselves single-pointedly to meditation. The same is often true in the Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. Each of these traditions presents the practice of meditation within the context of its own worldview, deeply informed by Buddhist insights.

**What are some of the distinctive features in the Mahayana and Vajrayana worldviews that would make their use of mindfulness different from that of the Theravada tradition?** Right mindfulness emerges only within the context of right view and right intention, and each of those schools of Buddhism has its own distinct interpretation of these latter two elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. In Theravada Buddhism, right view focuses on the three themes of impermanence, suffering, and nonself. Right intention is a motivation for practice



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## A MINDFUL BALANCE

based on the recognition of the nature and causes of suffering and the yearning to gain irreversible liberation from all mental afflictions that lie at the root of suffering. Some contemporary Vipassana teachers seldom emphasize right view or right intention, and I think it's doubtful that the practice of mindfulness alone will result in any "world-transcending" realizations. Again, if mindfulness as it is commonly understood today were all that is needed to achieve liberation, then all the rest of the Buddha's teachings would be pointless.

In Mahayana Buddhism, right mindfulness is practiced together with the view of emptiness, dependent origination, and Buddha-nature, and with the intention to achieve perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Without such a view and motivation, it is said that the practice of mindfulness and all related forms of meditation will not lead to Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana tradition, right view includes the "pure vision" of perceiving all phenomena as expressions of primordial consciousness, and right intention is the altruistic


motivation to achieve perfect enlightenment as swiftly as possible for the sake of all beings. This is the same motivation as for Mahayana practice, but it has a greater sense of urgency.

In each of those cases, mindfulness takes on a distinct flavor, just as it does if it's practiced with a materialistic worldview and a mundane motivation—that is, simply to relieve stress and find greater happiness in this lifetime alone. When bare attention is practiced within the context of a modern, materialistic worldview, there's no basis for believing it will produce the same results as when it's practiced within the context of Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana Buddhism.

Over the past century, Buddhism has been undergoing a kind of Protestant Reformation, with the decline of Buddhist monasticism and the increased popularity of meditation among lay Buddhists. It is wonderful that so many people nowadays are incorporating Buddhist meditation into their daily lives. But it is important not to overlook the value of devoting years to the study and practice of meditation as one's

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sole vocation. After all, we would not entrust our teeth to someone who had simply taken a number of dentistry workshops and practiced for an hour or so a day, so shouldn't we be even more careful about entrusting our minds to meditation instructors without years of professional training in the theory and practice of meditation?

It all depends on our view and intention with regard to meditation. If what we really want is a kind of meditative therapy to help us relieve stress, work through personal psychological problems, and lead a more balanced life, we don't need highly trained meditation teachers. But insofar as we set our goals higher—to liberation from the cycle of existence and the realization of perfect enlightenment—then we need to rely on those who have been professionally trained for years in the theory and practice of meditation. Traditionally, monastics have played a crucial role in this regard, and I hope they will continue to do so in the future. But for that to happen, they need to be supported by the Buddhist laity, as they have been in the past.

**With part-time Buddhists in our Western communities, are we unlikely to produce enlightened teachers?** If we had only part-time scientists, then no branch of science would have progressed to its current level of sophistication. Likewise, if we had only part-time doctors and psychotherapists, we would be much worse off with respect to our physical and mental healthcare. More broadly, imagine the world with only part-time mechanics, electricians, farmers, and teachers. If we left all the major professions in the hands of amateurs, modern civilization would be immeasurably impoverished.

The path to spiritual awakening is the most challenging of all human endeavors and entails the deepest transformation of a human being from a deluded, miserable creature to an enlightened sage. If we wish to produce enlightened teachers in modern society, then individuals who wholeheartedly wish to devote themselves to this path—whether or not they want to take monastic ordination—should be given all possible support. This would be our greatest gift to future generations. ▼

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