

WHAT DOES MINDFULNESS REALLY MEAN? A CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The purpose of this paper is to determine the meaning and function of mindfulness meditation using as the source of inquiry the Pāli Canon, the oldest complete collection of Buddhist texts to survive intact. Mindfulness is the chief factor in the practice of satipaṭṭhāna, the best known system of Buddhist meditation. In descriptions of satipaṭṭhāna two terms constantly recur: mindfulness (sati) and clear comprehension (sampajañña). An understanding of these terms based on the canonical texts is important not only from a philological angle but because such understanding has major bearings on the actual practice of meditation. The word sati originally meant 'memory,' but the Buddha ascribed to this old term a new meaning determined by the aims of his teaching. This meaning, the author holds, might best be characterized as 'lucid awareness.' He questions the common explanation of mindfulness as 'bare attention,' pointing out problems that lurk behind both words in this expression. He also briefly discusses the role of clear comprehension (sampajañña) and shows that it serves as a bridge between the observational function of mindfulness and the development of insight. Finally, he takes up the question whether mindfulness can legitimately be extracted from its traditional context and employed for secular purposes. He maintains that such non-traditional applications of mindfulness are acceptable and even admirable on the ground that they help alleviate human suffering, but he also cautions against a reductionist understanding of mindfulness and urges that investigators respect the religious tradition in which it is rooted.

1. Mindfulness in the Buddhist path

The entry of systematic mindfulness practice into the fields of stress reduction and psychotherapy has dramatically altered modern medicine's perspectives on our capacity to regulate and overcome our human vulnerabilities. Mindfulness made its debut as a therapeutic discipline in 1979, when Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced his programme of 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Since then its use to reduce pain and stress has been adopted by hundreds of medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world. The application of mindfulness in clinical settings has spread beyond stress reduction to psychotherapy, where it has proven a potent tool for

helping patients deal with conditions such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders.

While the use of mindfulness for medical purposes may initially seem to be a modern innovation, its roots actually go back 25 centuries to the teaching of the Buddha, who lived and taught in northeast India in the fifth century BC. The Buddha offered his teaching, called the *Dhamma* (Sanskrit *Dharma*), not as a set of doctrines demanding belief but as a body of principles and practices that sustain human beings in their quest for happiness and spiritual freedom. At its heart lies a system of training that leads to insight and the overcoming of suffering. This training spread throughout Asia along with Buddhism itself, and as Buddhism sent down roots in different lands, various lines of meditation flourished in the countries where its teachings were embraced. Many of these lineages have continued down to the present day, preserved in monasteries and hermitages by monks and nuns dedicated to the contemplative life.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, cheaper jet travel facilitated a cultural exchange that would have far-reaching consequences. Asian teachers of Buddhism, yoga, and other spiritual disciplines came to the US and attracted followings of young people disenchanted with materialism, militarism, and the flatlands of modernity. Young westerners also travelled to Asia and studied meditation with Buddhist masters, and then on returning to their home countries began to share what they had learned with their fellow countrymen. As meditation gained in popularity, it caught the attention of medical professionals, neuroscientists, and psychotherapists, setting off an exciting conversation between practitioners of eastern spirituality and western science.

At the heart of all classical systems of Buddhist meditation is a particular discipline that has come to be known as mindfulness. The Buddha himself gave particular prominence to mindfulness by including it in the noble eightfold path, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths into which he compressed his teaching: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. Right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) is the seventh factor of the path where, wedged between right effort and right concentration, it connects the energetic application of the mind to its stilling and unification.

The Buddha's discourses, as preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas, the early collections, employ a mnemonically terse formulaic style. We thus find right mindfulness consistently defined by a fixed formula that runs as follows:

And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... contemplating mind in mind ... contemplating phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called right mindfulness.¹

The most influential text in the Pāli Canon on the systematic practice of mindfulness, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the 'Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness,' opens with a proclamation highlighting both the purpose of this training and its methodology:

Monks, this is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the passing away of pain and displeasure, for the achievement of the method, for the realization of *nibbāna*, that is, the four establishments of mindfulness. What four? Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This, monks, is the one-way path for the purification of beings ... for the realization of *nibbāna*, that is, the four establishments of mindfulness.²

In this statement, the Buddha indicates the *goal* of the practice to be the extinction of suffering and the attainment of *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), a state of transcendent bliss and peace. The *method* is the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, the four establishments of mindfulness. From the formula for right mindfulness, we can deduce two important facts about the practice, one pertaining to its objective side, the other to its subjective side. On the objective side, we see that right mindfulness involves the reflexive contemplation of one's own experience, subsumed under the four objective domains of the body, feelings, states of mind, and experiential phenomena. The last of these is, in Pāli, called *dhammā*, a word which we can understand to designate experiential phenomena as organized into certain groups determined by the objectives of the Buddha's teaching, 'the Dhamma' in the broadest sense.

On the subjective side, the formula shows that the 'establishment of mindfulness' involves not only mindfulness but a constellation of mental factors that work in unison. Mindfulness, in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, always occurs as part of an *anupassanā*, a word that further clarifies its role. We usually translate *anupassanā* as 'contemplation,' but it might also be illuminating to understand it more literally as an act of 'observation.' The word is made up of the prefix *anu*, which suggests repetition or closeness, and the base *passanā*, which means 'seeing.' Thus mindfulness is part of a process that involves a close, repetitive observation of the object.

In the '*satipaṭṭhāna* refrain' several mental factors enter into this *anupassanā*, indicated by the phrase 'ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful' (*ātāpi sampajāno satimā*). Each of these words, according to the classical commentaries, represents a specific mental factor. 'Ardent' (*ātāpi*) implies energy, the strength to engage in the practice. Mindfulness (*sati*) is the element of watchfulness, the lucid awareness of each event that presents itself on the successive occasions of experience. The cognitive factor is indicated by the word *sampajāno*, 'clearly comprehending,' an adjective related to the noun *sampajāñña*, 'clear comprehension.'

The two terms, *sato* and *sampajāno*, often occur in proximity, implying a close affinity between their respective nouns, *sati* or mindfulness and *sampajāñña* or clear comprehension. To distinguish the two, I would describe mindfulness as lucid awareness of the phenomenal field. This element of lucid awareness prevails in the initial stages of the practice. But with the strengthening of mindfulness, clear comprehension supervenes and adds the cognitive element. In the practice of insight meditation, the meditator clearly comprehends the nature and qualities of arisen phenomena and relates them to the framework defined by the parameters of the Dhamma, the teaching as an organic whole. The expression 'clearly comprehending' thus suggests that the meditator not only observes phenomena but *interprets* the presentational field in a way that sets arisen phenomena in a meaningful context. As the practice advances, clear comprehension takes on an increasingly more important role, eventually evolving into direct insight (*vipassanā*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

2. The meaning of *sati*

A problem in hermeneutics, with intimate bearings on the actual practice of meditation, concerns the exact meaning of the word *sati* both in general and in relation to Buddhist contemplative activity. We take the rendering 'mindfulness' so much for granted that we rarely inquire into the precise nuances of the English term, let alone the meaning of the original Pāli word it represents and the adequacy of the former as a rendering for the latter. The word 'mindfulness' is itself so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cipher into which we can read virtually anything we want. Hence we seldom recognize that the word was chosen as a rendering for *sati* at a particular point in time, after other terms had been tried and found inadequate.

In Indian psychology apart from Buddhism, the word *smṛti*, the Sanskrit equivalent of Pāli *sati*, normally means memory. Thus Monier-Williams, in his Sanskrit-English Dictionary, defines *smṛti* as 'remembrance, reminiscence, thinking of or upon, calling to mind ... memory.'³ The Buddha's discourses, too, still preserve this meaning in certain contexts, as we will see. But we should not give this excessive importance. When devising a terminology that could convey the salient points and practices of his own teaching, the Buddha inevitably had to draw on the vocabulary available to him. To designate the practice that became the main pillar of his meditative system, he chose the word *sati*. But here *sati* no longer means memory. Rather, the Buddha assigned the word a new meaning consonant with his own system of psychology and meditation. Thus it would be a fundamental mistake to insist on reading the old meaning of memory into the new context.

It would not be a mistake, however, to try to determine how the word *sati* acquired its new application on the basis of the older meaning. Unfortunately for us, the Nikāyas or early discourse collections do not formally define *sati* in the clear expository manner that we are accustomed to finding in modern textbooks or in

scholarly studies of meditation practice. For four centuries, the Buddhist scriptures were preserved and transmitted orally, from one generation of reciters to the next. This method of transmission required that the compilers of the Buddha's discourses compress the main points into simple repetitive formulas that were conducive to easy memorization. Thus when we consult the texts to find out what they mean by *sati*, what we mostly encounter, instead of lucid explanations, are *operational demonstrations* that indicate, in practical terms, how *sati* functions in Buddhist psychology and meditation practice. It is from these that we must tease out the word's implications, testing them against each other and evaluating them by personal reflection and experience.

The first scholar, it seems, to render *sati* as 'mindfulness' was the great British translator T. W. Rhys Davids, founder of the Pali Text Society. His comment in the introduction to his translation of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* still shows remarkable acumen:

Etymologically Sati is Memory. But as happened at the rise of Buddhism to so many other expressions in common use, a new connotation was then attached to the word, a connotation that gave a new meaning to it, and renders 'memory' a most inadequate and misleading translation. It became the memory, recollection, calling-to-mind, being-aware-of, certain specified facts. Of these the most important was the impermanence (the coming to be as the result of a cause, and the passing away again) of all phenomena, bodily and mental. And it included the repeated application of this awareness, to each experience of life, from the ethical point of view.⁴

The Nikāyas employ two recurrent formulas to illustrate the meaning of *sati*. One harkens back to the old meaning of memory; the other refers to its occurrence in relation to the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. We meet the first in SN 48:9, which provides an analysis of the five spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The *sutta* briefly defines each with a short formula, the 'faculty of mindfulness' (*satindriya*) as follows:

And what, monks, is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and alertness, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of mindfulness.⁵

The operative expression in Pāli here is *saritā anussaritā*, 'one who remembers and recollects.' Both words are agent nouns derived from the verb *sarati*, 'to remember' or 'to be mindful'; the first is simple, the second is prefixed with *anu*. While the two words, taken in isolation, might be interpreted as referring either to remembrance or mindfulness, the phrase 'what was done and said long ago' (*cirakatampi cirabhāsitampi*) favours interpreting *sati* here in terms of memory.

However, in the next *sutta*, SN 48:10, the five faculties are defined again. The faculty of mindfulness is first defined, as in the preceding *sutta*, as the ability to

recollect what was done and said long ago. But then, as if admitting that this definition is inadequate, the text adds the stock formula on the four establishments of mindfulness: 'He dwells contemplating the body in the body . . . phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness.'⁶ This indicates that the compilers of the texts were not satisfied with the simple definition in terms of memory but felt the need to supplement it with another definition that underscores its connection with meditation practice. The next *sutta*, SN 48:11, raises the question: 'What is the faculty of mindfulness?' and answers: 'The mindfulness that one obtains on the basis of the four establishments of mindfulness: this is called the faculty of mindfulness.'⁷ Here, *sati* as memory is not brought in at all. One might suggest that *sati* as mindfulness, in the sense of a lucid awareness of the present, enables *sati* to function as memory. While this may be factually true, the texts themselves make no such suggestion but simply juxtapose the two formulations without explanation.

We find this ambivalence in the meaning of *sati* emerge from two otherwise parallel expositions on the seven factors of enlightenment (*satta bojjhaṅga*). The first enlightenment factor is mindfulness (*satisambojjhaṅga*), which is followed in order by investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. The earlier *sutta*, SN 46:3, opens with the Buddha praising the benefits of associating with monks fully accomplished in the training, one benefit being that a monk gets to hear the Dhamma from them. Having heard the Dhamma from them, 'the monk recollects that Dhamma and thinks it over. By doing so, on that occasion the monk arouses, develops, and fulfills the enlightenment factor of mindfulness.'⁸ In this passage, invisible in the English translation, mindfulness (*sati*) as an enlightenment factor is derived from the act of recollecting and reflecting on the teaching one has heard. The two verbs used are *anussarati* and *anuvitakketi*. The first is an augmented form of *sarati*, 'to remember,' from which the noun *sati* is derived; the second is the basis for the noun *vitakka*, thought or reflection. The discourse continues through the other six factors of enlightenment and ends with the fruits of the practice.

Taken on its own, this text seems to reinforce the interpretation of *sati* as the exercise of memory. However, in another *sutta*, SN 54:13, the Buddha treats each of the four establishments of mindfulness as a springboard to the seven factors of enlightenment. And so, when a monk 'dwells contemplating the body in the body . . . phenomena in phenomena, on that occasion the monk arouses, develops, and fulfills the enlightenment factor of mindfulness.'⁹ Once mindfulness has arisen, the other factors of enlightenment arise in turn, culminating in 'true knowledge and liberation.' This text has the same scaffolding as the earlier one, but here the enlightenment factor of mindfulness emerges *not* from memory, *not* from recollecting teachings that one has heard, but from direct contemplation of the body, feelings, mind, and experiential phenomena.

There is one Pāli word used by the commentaries to clarify the meaning of *sati* which, I think, testifies to an attempt to underscore the new role being assigned to it. This word is *upaṭṭhāna*. *Upaṭṭhāna* means, firstly, 'setting up, establishing,' which is what one does with mindfulness. Already in the Nikāyas the word is closely connected with *sati*. The compound *satipaṭṭhāna* is itself composed of *sati* and *upaṭṭhāna*. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the four *establishments* of mindfulness, a process of *setting up* mindfulness, distinguished as fourfold by way of its objective domains. This analysis indicates that to establish mindfulness is not to set about remembering something that occurred in the past, but to adopt a particular stance towards one's present experience. I characterize this as a stance of *observation* or *watchfulness* towards one's own experience. One might even call the stance of *sati* a 'bending back' of the light of consciousness upon the experiencing subject in its physical, sensory, and psychological dimensions. This act of 'bending back' serves to illuminate the events occurring in these domains, lifting them out from the twilight zone of unawareness into the light of clear cognition.

The sense of 'presence' pertaining to the word *upaṭṭhāna* comes out more explicitly in a canonical exegetical work called the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, which glosses each of the five faculties with another term through which it is to be 'directly known' (*abhiññeyyam*). Thus the faculty of faith is to be directly known as conviction; the faculty of energy, as exertion; the faculty of mindfulness, as presence (*upaṭṭhānatṭhena satindriyam*); the faculty of concentration, as non-distraction; and the faculty of wisdom, as seeing.¹⁰ Here, *sati* is equated with *upaṭṭhāna* not in the sense that the meditator 'establishes mindfulness,' but in the sense that mindfulness is itself an act of establishing presence. Mindfulness establishes the presence of the object and thereby makes it available to scrutiny and discernment.

This interpretation brings out the impact the practice of *sati* has on its objective field. On the one hand, we might say that it brackets the 'objectification' of the object that occurs in our everyday interactions with the world, whereby we treat objects as things 'out there' subservient to our pragmatic purposes. On the other hand, *sati* makes the objective field 'present' to awareness as an expanse of phenomena exhibiting their own distinctive phenomenal characteristics, as well as patterns and structures common to all conditioned phenomena. The net effect is to make the objective field clearly available for inspection. The *Visuddhimagga* supports this hypothesis when it states that *sati* has as its manifestation 'directly facing the objective domain' (*visayābhimukhabhāvapaccupaṭṭhānā*).¹¹ We might characterize mindfulness in this sense, in the simplest terms, as *lucid awareness*.¹²

I believe it is this aspect of *sati* that provides the connection between its two primary canonical meanings: as memory and as lucid awareness of present happenings. *Sati* makes the apprehended object stand forth vividly and distinctly before the mind. When the object being cognized pertains to the past—when it is apprehended as something that was formerly done, perceived, or spoken—its vivid presentation takes the form of memory. When the object is a bodily process

like in-and-out breathing or the act of walking back and forth, or when it is a mental event like a feeling or thought, its vivid presentation takes the form of lucid awareness of the present.

In the Pāli *suttas*, *sati* has still other roles in relation to meditation but these reinforce its characterization in terms of lucid awareness and vivid presentation. For example, the texts include as types of mindfulness recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*), contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body (*asubhasaññā*), and mindfulness of death (*maraṇassati*); for each brings its objective domain vividly before the mind. The *Metta Sutta* even refers to meditation on loving-kindness as a kind of mindfulness.¹³ In each of these cases, the object is a conceptual phenomenon—the qualities of the Buddha, the repulsiveness of the body, the inevitability of death, or lovable living beings—yet the mental pose that attends to them is designated mindfulness. What unites them, from the side of the subject, is the lucidity and vivacity of the act of awareness, and from the side of the object, its vivid presentation.

Apart from the meditative context, *sati* enters the noble eightfold path in another role that cannot be overlooked if we are to determine its exact meaning. This is as a guarantor of the correct practice of all the other path factors. MN 117 draws distinctions between the wrong (*micchā*) and right (*sammā*) versions of the first five path factors, from views to livelihood. After making each distinction, it then explains how right view, right effort, and right mindfulness occur in association with each path factor. Taking right intention as an example, the text reads: 'One understands wrong intention as it is and right intention as it is; this is one's right view. . . . One makes an effort to abandon wrong intention and to acquire right intention: this is one's right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong intention and mindfully one acquires and dwells in right intention: this is one's right mindfulness.'¹⁴ The same stipulation is laid down with regard to the other factors, including right speech, right action, and right livelihood, thus ensuring that one mindfully embraces the ethical constituents of the path.

This explanation makes problematic the common interpretation of mindfulness as a type of awareness intrinsically devoid of discrimination, evaluation, and judgment. While such a depiction of mindfulness has gained currency in the popular literature on meditation, it does not square well with the canonical texts and may even lead to a distorted view of how mindfulness is to be practiced. There are certainly occasions when the cultivation of mindfulness requires the practitioner to suspend discrimination, evaluation, and judgment, and to adopt instead a stance of simple observation. However, to fulfill its role as an *integral* member of the eightfold path mindfulness has to work in unison with right view and right effort. This means that the practitioner of mindfulness must at times evaluate mental qualities and intended deeds, make judgments about them, and engage in purposeful action. In conjunction with right view, mindfulness enables the practitioner to distinguish wholesome qualities from unwholesome ones, good deeds from bad deeds, beneficial states of mind from harmful states. In conjunction with right effort, it promotes the removal of

unwholesome mental qualities and the acquisition of wholesome qualities. It is only in this way that the practice of mindfulness can lay a foundation for correct wisdom to arise and extirpate the roots of suffering.

3. Mindfulness and bare attention

Many commentators who teach and practice in the contemporary vipassana movement have sought to convey the experiential flavour of mindfulness by means of the expression 'bare attention.' With certain reservations (which I will discuss below), I believe this characterization is acceptable if understood as a *procedural directive* for cultivating mindfulness in accordance with certain methods. It helps a novice meditator who has newly embarked on this unfamiliar enterprise get a grip on the appropriate way to observe the phenomenal field. The purpose of the expression would then be seen as pragmatic rather than doctrinal, as pedagogical rather than definitive.

When, however, it is considered in the light of canonical sources, it is hard to see 'bare attention' as a valid *theoretical* description of mindfulness applicable to all its modalities. As I showed earlier, mindfulness is a versatile mental quality that can be developed in a variety of ways. While certain methods emphasize a type of awareness that might be pragmatically described as 'bare attention,' in the full spectrum of Buddhist meditation techniques this is only one among a number of alternative ways to cultivate mindfulness many of which are not shy about utilizing conceptual thought and an explicit scheme of values. We saw above that mindfulness can be developed by attending to the repulsiveness of the body, contemplating death, and pervading beings with loving-kindness. What unites all these—as well as bare attention—is a quality of lucid awareness that allows the object to stand forth with a vivid and distinct presence.

A further problem that arises when the expression 'bare attention' is taken to be more than a pedagogical device is that it involves a crossing of technical terms that in a rigorous deployment of Buddhist terminology should be kept apart. One influential attempt to establish a theoretical equivalency between mindfulness and 'bare attention' is a passage in Ven. Henepola Gunaratana's popular book, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, often cited on the internet. Here we find mindfulness identified with the brief moment of preconceptual awareness that, in Buddhist cognitive theory, precedes the onset of conceptual determination:

When you first become aware of something, there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the thing, before you identify it. That is a state of awareness. Ordinarily, this state is short-lived. It is that flashing split second just as you focus your eyes on the thing, just as you focus your mind on the thing, just before you objectify it, clamp down on it mentally, and segregate it from the rest of existence. It takes place just before you start thinking about it—before your mind says, 'Oh, it's a dog.' *That flowing, soft-focused moment of pure awareness is mindfulness . . .* That original moment of mindfulness is rapidly

passed over. It is the purpose of vipassana meditation to train us to prolong that moment of awareness.¹⁵

A little later, the author emphasizes the non-conceptual, non-discursive quality of mindfulness, which he explicitly identifies with bare attention:

Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is 'bare attention.' It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts It is, rather, the direct and immediate experiencing of whatever is happening, without the medium of thought. It comes before thought in the perceptual process.¹⁶

These passages seem to conflate two mental functions that, in classical Buddhist accounts of cognition, are regarded as distinct. One is the immediate preconceptual apprehension of an object that occurs as soon as the object comes into range of cognition. This act occurs automatically and spontaneously. It is ethically indeterminate, common to the thief and the saint, the toddler and the thinker, the sensualist and the yogi. Mindfulness, in contrast, does not occur automatically but is a quality to be cultivated (*bhāvetabba*). It arises when the cognitive processing of the object is already well underway and, far from being spontaneous, comes into being through a deliberate effort. It also has an ethical function, being part and parcel of the attempt to eliminate the unwholesome and establish the wholesome.

Since mindfulness plays the key role in such meditations as recollection of the Buddha, the perception of the body's repulsiveness, and mindfulness of death, it is also hard to see how mindfulness can be essentially non-conceptual and non-discursive. In certain types of mindfulness practice, conceptualization and discursive thought may be suspended in favour of non-conceptual observation, but there is little evidence in the Pāli Canon and its commentaries that mindfulness *by its very nature* is devoid of conceptualization. In some types of mindfulness practice emphasis falls on simple observation of what is occurring in the present, in others less so.

Even in the simple observational stance, there is a dichotomy in how mindfulness is applied. Mindfulness may be focused on a single point of observation, as in mindfulness of breathing, especially when developed for the purpose of attaining concentration (*samādhi*). But mindfulness may also be open and undirected, accessing whatever phenomena appear, especially when applied for the purpose of developing insight (*vipassanā*). Still other types of mindfulness practice make extensive use of conceptualization and discursive thought, but apply them in a different way than in ordinary thinking. Instead of allowing thought to drift at random, governed by defiled emotions, habit patterns, and practical survival needs, the meditator deliberately uses thought and concepts to keep the object before the mind.

To my knowledge, the first person to use the expression 'bare attention' to characterize mindfulness was the elder German monk, Ven. Nyanaponika Thera,

my own spiritual teacher with whom I lived for 12 years at his hermitage in Sri Lanka. Nyanaponika was also probably the first Western writer on Buddhism to explore the practice of mindfulness at length, which he did both in his influential book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, and in his tract, *The Power of Mindfulness*. Nyanaponika did not intend 'bare attention' to be a translation of *sati* (he used the established rendering 'mindfulness'), but coined the term to highlight the initial stage in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. To distinguish the two components of the practice, *sati* and *sampajañña*, he wrote that 'mindfulness (*sati*) applies preeminently to the attitude and practice of bare attention in a purely receptive state of mind [while] clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) comes into operation when any kind of action is required, including active reflective thoughts on things observed.'¹⁷ I will have more to say about clear comprehension below. For now I am concerned with bare attention.

Nyanaponika defines bare attention quite succinctly thus:

Bare attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception. It is called 'bare' because it attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind ... When attending to that sixfold sense impression, attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech, or by mental comment, which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc.), judgement or reflection.¹⁸

Contrary to some contemporary vipassana teachers, Nyanaponika did not regard 'bare attention' as non-conceptual and non-verbal. The Mahasi Sayadaw system of insight meditation, which he had practiced, stresses the importance of precisely labeling the constituents of one's experience, and Nyanaponika developed this methodology in his own way informed by keen psychological acumen. Although he highlights the open, receptive, and non-judgmental attitude inherent in bare attention, he also held that precise verbal designation plays a critical role in the three tasks of knowing, shaping, and purifying the mind.

In *The Power of Mindfulness* Nyanaponika calls this process 'tidying up the mental household.'¹⁹ He writes that this work requires us to examine the mind's 'dark, untidy corners,' which are 'the hideouts of our most dangerous enemies,' the mental defilements of greed, hate and delusion. Such examination is the work of mindfulness as bare attention, which involves calling things by their true names:

The calmly observant glance of mindfulness discovers the demons in their hiding-places. The practice of calling them by their names drives them out into the open, into the daylight of consciousness. There they will feel embarrassed and obliged to justify themselves, although at this stage of bare attention they have not yet even been subjected to any closer questioning except about their names, their identity. If forced into the open while still in an incipient stage, they will be incapable of withstanding scrutiny and will just dwindle away. Thus a first victory over them may be won, even at an early stage of the practice.²⁰

Although I see significant differences between Nyanaponika's interpretation of mindfulness and interpretations in popular presentations of meditation, I still believe it was a mistake for him to use the expression 'bare attention' to describe this preliminary stage of mindfulness. I make this claim for two reasons, one pertaining to the word 'attention,' the other to the word 'bare.'

My reservation regarding 'attention' derives from the use of this word as the standard rendering for another technical term in the Buddhist analysis of mind, *manasikāra*, which designates a mental function whose role is quite different from that of mindfulness. The principal role of *manasikāra* is to turn the mind to an object. It is a spontaneous and automatic function exercised whenever an object impinges on a sense faculty or arises at the 'mind door.' It is translated 'attention' in the sense that it is the turning of attention to an object, the mind's 'adventence to the object.'²¹ This, however, is not the role of *sati*. By explaining *sati*, even in its rudimentary stage, as 'bare attention,' Nyanaponika merged its meaning with that of *manasikāra*. But whereas *manasikāra* generally predominates at the inception of a cognitive process, *sati* supervenes at a later stage, sustaining attention on the object and making it appear vividly to lucid cognition.

Nyanaponika was a keen scholar of the Buddhist psychological system known as Abhidhamma and thus his choice of 'attention' to characterize *sati* could not have been due to carelessness. I suspect that the underlying reason for his choice was a melding of words in the two European languages in which he wrote, German and English. In his earliest works, written in German, he had rendered *sati* as *achtsamkeit*, which means 'attentiveness, heedfulness, . . . mindfulness, care.'²² Thus, whereas 'mindfulness' might be regarded as synonymous with 'attentiveness' in the sense of sustained attention, when it is glossed as 'bare attention' this risks confounding *sati* and *manasikāra*, deliberate mindfulness and the automatic act of adventence. I think it was this conflation of the two technical terms that led Gunaratana, in the passage cited above, to identify mindfulness with the brief moment of non-conceptual awareness that precedes the arising of concepts and discursive thought.

My reservation about using the word 'bare' to qualify this type of attention rests on more philosophical grounds. I think the expression 'bare attention' can be pragmatically useful to guide a beginning practitioner in the method of setting up mindfulness, and this is presumably what Nyanaponika had in mind when he wrote that bare attention 'is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech, or by mental comment.' However, from a theoretical perspective it is questionable whether any act of attention, or any other mental act, can literally be 'bare.' As I see it, virtually any intentional act is necessarily subject to a vast set of determinants, internal and external, that governs the way it functions. It occurs *embodied* in a particular person with a unique biography and personality, and it occurs *embedded* in a particular context—historical, social, and cultural—that gives it a specific orientation on which its very identity depends.

We can, for example, distinguish contextual orientations depending on whether the practice is taken up by a traditional Buddhist who subscribes to the classical Buddhist worldview or by a contemporary westerner who takes up meditation against the background of a holistic secular perspective. The difference is neatly summarized by Gil Fronsdal:

Rather than stressing world-renunciation, they [Western lay teachers] stress engagement with, and freedom *within* the world. Rather than rejecting the body, these Western teachers embrace the body as part of the wholistic [sic] field of practice. Rather than stressing ultimate spiritual goals such as full enlightenment, ending the cycles of rebirth, or attaining the various stages of sainthood, many Western teachers tend to stress the immediate benefits of mindfulness and untroubled, equanimous presence in the midst of life's vicissitudes.²³

Surely these differences in orientation are going to flow over and shape the experience of mindfulness. One might argue that awareness of the breath is awareness of the breath no matter who is breathing. While I certainly could not dispute this, I also think it likely that once a meditator goes beyond this preliminary stage, presuppositions and expectations will inevitably come into play.

Instead of thinking of mindfulness as being exclusively 'bare,' I prefer to think of it as spread out along a spectrum, with varying layers of conceptual content ranging from 'heavy' to 'light' to 'zero,' depending on the particular style of mindfulness being practiced. Even the *satipaṭṭhāna* system itself shows such variation. In certain *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises, the determining context and orientation might be 'heavy,' in others 'light.' For example, in contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body, attention to the four elements, or the charnel ground meditations, the orientation towards disenchantment and dispassion is heavily loaded from the start. From the outset, mindfulness works in close association with thought and examination (*vitakka* and *vicāra*), which requires a sophisticated deployment of conceptual activity. The style of insight meditation taught by Mahasi Sayadaw makes much lighter use of conceptualization. A meditator begins by merely noting the expansion and contraction of the abdomen, and then gradually extends the act of noting to anything that impinges on awareness.²⁴ In a system that aims at the attainment of the *jhānas*, the conceptual content will be much thinner and effectively vanish with the actual attainment of *jhāna*, even while mindfulness becomes purer and clearer.

But in all cases, if mindfulness is to qualify as the 'right mindfulness' (*sammā sati*) of the noble eightfold path, it will have to be connected to a web of factors that give it direction and purpose. As a component of the path, it must be guided by right view, the first path factor, which links the practice to understanding. It must be directed by right intention, the second factor, the aspiration for dispassion, benevolence, and harmlessness. It should be grounded in the three ethical factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. And it should be conjoined with right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), the endeavour to eliminate unwholesome mental qualities and to awaken and fulfill wholesome qualities.

In short, the expression 'bare attention' seems faulty in two respects: first, because it conflates the two distinct mental factors of *sati* and *manasikāra*; and second, because no act of cognition is ever entirely devoid of factors imparting to it orientation and meaning. In relation to *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, one might perhaps speak of different degrees of colouring, different 'weights' of a determining context. However, I do not believe one can ever leave behind all determinants and achieve a state of absolute openness, vacuity, and indeterminacy.

4. What the *suttas* say

Nevertheless, despite my reservations about the use of 'bare attention' as an alternative expression for *sati*, if we consider *how* mindfulness is to be practiced in the system laid down in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we can find considerable support for the idea that the initial task of *sati* is to 'keep to a bare registering of the facts observed' as free as possible from *distorting* conceptual elaborations. The problem, as I see it, is not with conceptualization itself, but with conceptualization that ascribes erroneous attributes to the objects and the experiential act itself. An experiential event can be viewed as a field distributed between two poles, the objective datum and the subjective act that cognizes it. Ordinarily, on account of the spontaneous functioning of unenlightened consciousness, this polarity is reified into a sharp duality of subject and object. The subjective pole seems to coalesce into a substantially existent 'I,' an ego-self that hovers in the background as an autonomous and independent entity. The objective pole presents itself as an object that is there 'for me,' ready to serve or oppose my purposes; thus it becomes a potential object of craving or aversion. This process is what the *suttas* refer to as 'I-making' and 'mine-making' (*ahaṃkāra mamamkāra*). It is the task of meditation to dismantle this structure by penetrating the selfless nature of all phenomena, whether pertaining to the objective or subjective poles of the experience.

While it is only *paññā* or wisdom that can eradicate the cognitive distortions, *sati* helps to keep them in check. By bringing into focus the experiential field, *sati* illuminates objects without the usual overlay of distorted conceptual elaborations that obscure their real nature. The initial instruction on mindfulness of breathing, the first exercise in contemplation of the body, exemplifies this well. The meditator sits down, holds his body erect, and establishes mindfulness in front of him. Then, 'just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out' (*sato va assasati, sato passasati*). The expression *sato va* is emphatic: *just* mindful, *only* mindful, *simply* mindful. Here, contrary to its original sense, *sati* could not mean 'remembering.' The only thing the meditator should be remembering is to keep the breath in mind. The breath is something occurring in the present, not in the past, which means that in this context *sati* is attentiveness to a present event, not recollection of the past.

The instruction continues: 'When a monk breathes in long, he knows, "I breathe in long"; and when he breathes out long, he knows, "I breathe out long."' The same is said with regard to short breaths. The key word here is *pajānāti*, 'one knows.' The verb is the source of the noun *paññā*, usually translated 'wisdom,' but

it is clear that at this point *paññā* as wisdom has not yet arisen. What occurs, rather, is just a simple, even minimal, discernment of the quality of the breath. We might see two phases to be involved in this process. First, mindfulness, as the quality of *upaṭṭhāna* or lucid awareness, illuminates the presence of the breath. Then, almost simultaneously, a simple cognition, indicated by *pajānāti*, steps in and registers the breath as coming in or going out, as long or short. We can see this as a rudimentary act of *sampajañña*, clear comprehension.

The same method of description is found in the sections on feelings and states of mind. When the meditator experiences a particular feeling—pleasant, painful, or neutral—he knows what he feels. When a particular state of mind has arisen—a mind with lust, hatred, or delusion, or a mind without lust, hatred, or delusion—in each case he knows that state of mind just as it is. As I see it, in such contemplation, the role of *sati* or mindfulness is to lay open the contents of the experiential field; the role of *sampajañña*, clear comprehension, is to determine and define the contents for what they are. *Sampajañña* advances and begins to turn into *paññā* in the section on contemplating the arising and vanishing of each type of object. This act explicitly relates them to the broad scheme set up by the teachings.

With the fourth contemplation, contemplation of phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*), the situation becomes more complex and thus clear comprehension gains prominence. The first division of this section deals with the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, drowsiness, restlessness, and doubt. Once again mindfulness lays open the experiential field and clear comprehension recognizes the presence or absence of a particular hindrance. When mindfulness and clear comprehension have jointly exercised this preparatory function, *paññā*, in the sense of wisdom, enters and subsumes the hindrance under the principle of conditionality. The meditator must understand how the hindrance arises, how it is abandoned, and how it can be prevented from arising again in the future.

A similar sequence is found in the following exercises on the five aggregates, the six inner and outer sense bases, the seven enlightenment factors, and the Four Noble Truths. In each case, considerably more is involved than 'bare attention' to the flux of immediate experience. Rather, investigation is needed in order to understand how certain factors arise, how they are eliminated or strengthened, and in the case of the positive factors, how they are brought to fulfillment. As a matter of necessity, one adopts certain conceptual schemes as matrices through which to view the vortex of experience, schemes that plot phenomena against the guidelines mandated by the Dhamma and steer the practice towards its intended goal, the realization of *nibbāna*. At this point the direction, context, and orientation of the practice, far from being dispensable, have a decisive impact on the way mindfulness operates.

5. Clear comprehension

While I said just above that clear comprehension plays a more prominent role in the contemplation of experiential phenomena, the refrain on right mindfulness

shows that clear comprehension has been present to some degree all along. The formula describes clear comprehension as a constant entering each exercise virtually from the start. Whether contemplating the body, feelings, states of mind, or experiential phenomena, the meditator dwells 'ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful.'

In the Nikāyas, there are two stock passages that describe the practice of clear comprehension. The more frequent passage occurs as a separate section in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, comprised under contemplation of the body:

And how, monks, does a monk exercise clear comprehension? Here, a monk acts with clear comprehension when going forward and returning; when looking ahead and looking aside; when drawing in and extending the limbs; when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; when eating, drinking, chewing his food, and tasting; when defecating and urinating; when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, speaking, and keeping silent. It is in such a way that a monk exercises clear comprehension.²⁵

Taken in isolation, this account might give the impression that clear comprehension refers solely to the deliberative performance of one's daily tasks. However, a pair of *suttas* addressed to sick monks in the infirmary shows that mindfulness and clear comprehension jointly lead to insight and liberation. On two separate occasions the Buddha visits the infirmary and enjoins the monks to be mindful and clearly comprehend things. He explains the former by way of the stock formula on the four *satipaṭṭhānas* and the latter by the above formula on clear comprehension. He then states that a monk who is mindful and clearly comprehends things will understand the dependent origination of feelings, contemplate their impermanence, and abandon lust, aversion, and ignorance, whereby he attains *nibbāna*.²⁶

The other passage on clear comprehension has a different emphasis. It describes clear comprehension, not as discernment of one's day-to-day activities, but as a reflexive cognition of mental events:

And how does a monk exercise clear comprehension? Here, for a monk feelings are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away. Thoughts are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away. Perceptions are understood as they arise, as they remain present, as they pass away. It is in this way that a monk exercises clear comprehension.²⁷

This stage of contemplation evidently marks a turning point where *sampajañña* is maturing into *paññā*, where clear comprehension becomes insight into impermanence, direct knowledge of the arising and passing of phenomena.

The Pāli commentaries consistently explain clear comprehension to have a fourfold application: (1) as comprehending the purpose of one's actions; (2) as prudence in the choice of means; (3) as engagement with the meditation subject; and (4) as discernment of things in their true nature. We might correlate the first two applications with clear comprehension in one's daily tasks, as

described in the first formula. The third might be interpreted as the clear comprehension referred to by the word *sampajāno* in the *satipaṭṭhāna* refrain. And the fourth obviously marks the stage where clear comprehension turns into actual insight.²⁸

6. Expanding into new frontiers

Mindfulness has travelled a long way from its homeland in northeast India. It has journeyed to the island of Sri Lanka, the river basins of southeast Asia, the mountain monasteries of China, Korea, and Japan, and the hermitages of the Himalayan kingdoms. But the last lap of its journey is without parallel. Today, Buddhist meditation has been lifted from its traditional setting in Buddhist doctrine and faith and transplanted in a secularized culture bent on pragmatic results. Here it is finding new accommodations in urban meditation centres and even in busy hospitals, pain clinics, and treatment centres. Its teachers and practitioners are more likely to wear street clothing or white coats than ochre robes; they are more likely to hold degrees in medicine and psychology than in Buddhist philosophy and scripture. Meditation is being taught to help people obtain release, not from the cycle of birth and death, but from the strains of financial pressures, psychological disorders, and stressful relationships.

As stress-reduction specialists and psychotherapists seek new methods to help their patients deal with physical pain, grief, and distress, the ancient system of mindfulness meditation offers fresh promise. But the response from the Buddhist side has not been exclusively enthusiastic. Confirmed adherents of Buddhism have given the secular adaptation of Buddhist meditation mixed reviews. While some applaud the application of mindfulness to an array of new fields, from medical centres to high schools to maximum security prisons, others have reacted with skepticism if not with shrill denunciations. Many sincere Buddhists, still undecided, struggle with questions to which the canonical texts provide no clear answers: 'Is the pure Dhamma being diluted for secular ends, reduced to a mere therapy? Won't the outcome be to make *samsāra* more pleasant rather than to liberate people from the cycle of rebirths? Did anyone ever attain enlightenment in a medical clinic?'

It is my personal belief that we need to strike a balance between caution and appreciation. There is a real danger that scientists who investigate traditional eastern contemplative practices might be swayed by materialistic premises to explain their efficacy reductively, on the exclusive basis of neurophysiology. There is a real danger that the contemplative challenge might be reduced to a matter of gaining skill in certain techniques, dispensing with such qualities as faith, aspiration, devotion, and self-surrender, all integral to the act of 'going for refuge.' However, I do not think we need be alarmed about the adaptation of Buddhist practices for secular ends. I call to mind a statement the Buddha made in the weeks before his death: 'The Tathāgata has no closed fist of a teacher with respect to teachings.'²⁹ By this he meant that he had taught everything important without

holding back any esoteric doctrines, but I like to interpret his words to mean that we can let anyone take from the Dhamma whatever they find useful even if it is for secular purposes.

I feel that if psychotherapists can draw upon Buddhist mindfulness practice to help people overcome anxiety and distress, their work is most commendable. If clinicians find that mindfulness helps patients accept pain and illness, that is wonderful—and having a chronic pain condition myself, I give extra kudos to their work. If peace activists find the meditation on loving-kindness helps them be more peaceful in their advocacy of peace, again, that is splendid. And if a businessman finds his Zen practice makes him more considerate of his clients, again this should merit our approval.

It is inevitable that mindfulness and other practices adopted from Buddhism will find new applications in the modern West, where worldviews and lifestyles are so different from those of southern and eastern Asia. If such practices benefit those who do not accept the full framework of Buddhist teaching, I see no reason to grudge them the right to take what they need. To the contrary, I feel that those who adapt the Dhamma to these new purposes are to be admired for their pioneering courage and insight. As long as they act with prudence and a compassionate intent, let them make use of the Dhamma in any way they can to help others.

At the same time, I also believe that it is our responsibility, as heirs of the Dhamma, to remind such experimenters that they have entered a sanctuary deemed sacred by Buddhists. Thus, respectful towards their sources, they should pursue their investigations with humility and gratitude. They should recognize that while the Dhamma bids everyone come and take what they need, they are drawing from an ancient well of sacred wisdom that has nourished countless spirits through the centuries and whose waters still retain their potency for those who drink from them today.

NOTES

1. DN 22.21 (II 313; LDB 348-49). MN 141.30 (III 252; MLDB 1100-1101). SN 45:8 (V 9-10; CDB 1529). See also Appendix.
2. DN 22.1 (II 290; LDB 335). MN 10.1 (I 55; MLDB 145).
3. Monier-Williams (2005, 1272).
4. Rhys Davids (1910). Cited from unpaginated online version.
5. SN V 197 (CDB 1671). The formula also occurs at AN 5:14 and AN 7:4 as a definition of the 'power of mindfulness.' Interestingly, the Chinese parallels to SN 48:9 (SĀ 646 at T II 182b19) and AN 5:14 (SĀ 675 at T II 185c12) define the faculty and power of mindfulness, respectively, by way of the four bases of mindfulness. This might have resulted from standardization made at a time when the old meaning of memory had faded even further into the background.
6. SN V 198 (CDB 1672).
7. SN V 200 (CDB 1673).

8. SN V 67 (CDB 1571).
9. SN V 329-33 (CDB 1780-85).
10. Paṭis I 20. Though included in the Pāli Canon, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* obviously dates from a period later than the old Nikāyas, which contain the Buddha's discourses. The work was a major influence on the *Visuddhimagga*, which often quotes from it.
11. *Vism* 464. See Ñānamoli (1991, 14.141).
12. I hesitate to use the word 'awareness' without qualification as a rendering of *sati*, for this word has been chosen to represent a number of Pāli technical terms ranging from *viññāṇa* (consciousness) and *citta* (mind) to *sati*, *sampajañña*, and *vijjā* (penetrative knowledge).
13. Recollection of the Buddha is at AN 6:10, AN 6:25, etc. Contemplation of the body's repulsiveness is at DN 22.5 (LDB 337) and MN 10.10 (MLDB 147) and elsewhere. Mindfulness of death is at AN 6:19 and AN 6:20. Sn v. 151 says about meditation on loving-kindness: *etaṃ satim adhiṭṭheyya*, 'one should resolve on this mindfulness.'
14. MN 117.10-15 (III 72-73; MLDB 935-36).
15. Gunaratana (2002, 138, italics mine).
16. Gunaratana (2002, 140).
17. Nyanaponika (1962, 29). Here and below I take the liberty of lower casing the first letters of Buddhist technical terms that Nyanaponika, following German custom, capitalized.
18. Nyanaponika (1962, 30). An almost identical definition is found in Nyanaponika (1968, vii).
19. Nyanaponika (1968, 1).
20. Nyanaponika (1968, 8).
21. *Manasikāra* also occurs in another context, when it is prefixed either by *ayoniso* or *yoniso*. *Ayoniso manasikāra* is 'careless reflection,' attending to an object in a way that causes unarisen defilements to arise and arisen defilements to increase. *Yoniso manasikāra* is the opposite: careful reflection on an object that prevents unarisen defilements from arising and removes arisen defilements.
22. <http://en.bab.la/dictionary/german-english/achtsamkeit>.
23. Fronsdal (1995).
24. See Mahasi Sayadaw (1971, 3–12).
25. DN 22.4 (II 292; LDB 337). MN 10.8 (I 57; MLDB 147). The same passage occurs in many discourses on the 'progressive training.' See, for example, DN 2.65 (I 70-71; LDB 100); MN 27.16 (I 181; MLDB 274); AN 4:198 (II 210).
26. SN 36.7, 36.8 (IV 210-14; CDB 1266-69).
27. SN 47:35 (V 180-81; CDB 1657). See, too, AN 4:41 (II 45), which calls this the development of concentration that leads to mindfulness and clear comprehension.
28. The four types of clear comprehension are discussed at length in Nyanaponika (1962, 45–55). I have translated the commentarial explanation in Bodhi (2008, 94–130).
29. DN 16.2.25 (II 100; LDB 245).

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Appendix

Key to abbreviations

All references to Pāli texts are to the editions published by the Pali Text Society. Canonical references are to *sutta* number, followed by volume and page of the PTS Pāli edition, followed by title and page number of the Wisdom Publications 'Teachings of the Buddha' series. My translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya is still in progress and thus has not been referenced.

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
CDB	<i>Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Bodhi 2000)
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
LDB	<i>Long Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Walshe 1995)
MLDB	<i>Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha</i> (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995)
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
Paṭis	Paṭisambhidāmagga
SĀ	Saṃyuktāgama
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Sn	Suttanipāta
T	Taisho Chinese Tripiṭaka (CBETA edition)
Vism	Visuddhimagga