

# ON SOME DEFINITIONS OF MINDFULNESS

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*The Buddhist technical term was first translated as 'mindfulness' by T.W. Rhys Davids in 1881. Since then various authors, including Rhys Davids, have attempted definitions of what precisely is meant by mindfulness. Initially these were based on readings and interpretations of ancient Buddhist texts. Beginning in the 1950s some definitions of mindfulness became more informed by the actual practice of meditation. In particular, Nyanaponika's definition appears to have had significant influence on the definition of mindfulness adopted by those who developed MBSR and MBCT. Turning to the various aspects of mindfulness brought out in traditional Theravāda definitions, several of those highlighted are not initially apparent in the definitions current in the context of MBSR and MBCT. Moreover, the MBSR and MBCT notion of mindfulness as 'non-judgmental' needs careful consideration from a traditional Buddhist perspective. Nevertheless, the difference in emphasis apparent in the theoretical definitions of mindfulness may not be so significant in the actual clinical application of mindfulness techniques.*

It appears to have been T. W. Rhys Davids who first translated the Buddhist technical term *sati* (in its Pali form) or *smṛti* (in its Sanskrit form) by the English word 'mindfulness'. We cannot be sure quite what considerations led Rhys Davids to choose this word, since so far as I know he nowhere reveals them. The dictionaries he would have had before him— Monier Williams 1872, Childers 1875, Böhtlingk and Roth 1855–1875 <sup>1</sup>—would have suggested such translations as 'remembrance, memory, reminiscence, recollection, thinking of or upon (any person or thing), calling to mind' (from Monier Williams 1872), since this was the usual everyday meaning of the then more familiar Sanskrit term *smṛti*. It is true that for the verb *smarati*, Monier Williams gives the following as the initial range of meanings: 'to remember . . . to recollect, call to mind, bear in mind, think of, think upon, be mindful of', and this may have suggested the translation 'mindfulness'. Yet Childers' 1875 Pali dictionary gives merely 'recollection', adding, perhaps mindful that he was here dealing with a Buddhist technical term, 'active state of mind, fixing the mind strongly upon any subject, attention, attentiveness, thought, reflection, consciousness'; for the expression *upaṭṭhitā sati* he gives 'presence of mind' and for *satipaṭṭhāna* he gives 'fixing the attention, earnest meditation'. Of course, there is no reason to assume that 'mindfulness' is necessarily a particularly

surprising translation of *sati*; the OED records the use of the English 'mindfulness' in the sense of 'the state or quality of being mindful; attention; memory (*obs.*); intention, purpose (*obs.*)' from 1530 ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).

It is clear, however, that the early translators of Buddhist texts were uncertain quite how to render *sati* as a Buddhist technical term, since words like 'remembrance' and 'memory' did not seem quite to fit what was required by its Buddhist usage. The earliest rendering I have been able to find is Gogerly's 1845 'correct meditation' for *sammā-sati* in the context of the eightfold path.<sup>2</sup> In 1850, Spence Hardy explained 'smirti' as 'the faculty that reasons on moral subjects, the conscience' (1850, 442). Three years later in his *Manual of Buddhism*, in several places he leaves the term untranslated (1853, 412, 413), but explains *satipatṭhāna* as 'four subjects of thought upon which the attention must be fixed, and that must be rightly understood' (1853, 497) and *sati* as a constituent of awakening (*sambojjhaṅga*) as 'the ascertainment of truth by mental application' (1853, 498) and, in his index, as simply 'conscience' (1853, 531). It is easy to be dismissive of these early 'missionary' explanations and translations as inadequate and based on misunderstanding, yet both Gogerly and Spence Hardy spent many years in Ceylon, were proficient in Sinhala and had close dealings with both lay and monastic Buddhists; thus their renderings and explanations are likely to reflect at least impressions derived from those interactions.

In 1881, T. W. Rhys Davids published translations of seven *suttas* from the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas. His translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* suggests some uncertainty about the correct rendering of *sati*. We find *sati* as 'mental activity' (Rhys Davids 1881, 9, 14, 63), as simply 'thought' (1881, 63); while the *satipatṭhānas* are also the 'earnest meditations' (1881, 62, 63).<sup>3</sup> Yet it is perhaps already clear that 'mindfulness' had become Rhys Davids' preferred translation. In his introduction to the translation of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* he comments of *sammā-sati* in the context of the eightfold path:

*sati* is literally 'memory,' but is used with reference to the constantly repeated phrase 'mindful and thoughtful' (*sato sampajāno*); and means that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist. (Rhys David 1881, 145)

In his 1899 translation of the first volume of the Dīgha Nikāya he uses 'mindful(ness)' more or less consistently,<sup>4</sup> but it is only with his 1910 translation of the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta*<sup>5</sup> that Rhys Davids offers more developed consideration of the term. In the introduction to his translation he makes several points. He suggests that 'the doctrine' expounded in the *sutta* 'is perhaps the most important, after that of the Aryan Path, in early Buddhism' and that the *sutta* remains 'in frequent and popular use among those Buddhists who have adhered to the ancient faith'. On the issue of what 'mindfulness' is, he comments simply that '[t]his Suttanta will show', but goes on to offer certain observations about the term. He suggests that while *sati* is etymologically 'memory', in the Buddhist context this is 'a most inadequate and misleading translation' since *sati* has here

become '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. (Rhys David 1910, 322)

Here Rhys Davids seems to be highlighting one of the repeated refrains of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* that stresses how the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* involves watching how things 'come to be' and how they 'pass away'. Rhys Davids next offers some comparative reflections on Buddhist and Christian spirituality:

When Christians are told: 'Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God,' a way is shown by which any act, however lowly, can, by the addition of a remembrance (a Sati), be surrounded by the halo of a high moral enthusiasm; and how, by the continual practice of this remembrance, a permanent improvement in character can be obtained. The Buddhist idea is similar. But the remembrance is of what we should now call natural law, not of a deity. This has been made a cornerstone of the system of ethical self-training. The corresponding cornerstone in the West is conscience; and indeed, so close is the resemblance in their effects that one scholar has chosen 'conscience' as a rendering of Sati;—wrongly, we think, as this introduces a Western idea into Buddhism. (Rhys David 1910, 323)

Whether Rhys Davids has correctly characterized either Buddhist or Christian practice here is no doubt a matter for debate. Nonetheless, from the perspective of early Buddhist texts it is not hard to see what prompted Rhys Davids to draw the comparison he did: the message of *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* might be summed up as 'if you consistently "remember" what it is you are doing in any given moment, you will truly see what it is you are doing; and in truly seeing what it is you are doing, those of your deeds, words and thoughts that are motivated by greed, hatred and delusion will become impossible for you'. The association of 'mindfulness' with 'conscience', however, and its characterization as a kind of ethical intuition is not what has been emphasized or brought out in the definitions that have been current more recently in the context of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, for example, which tend to stress that mindfulness is a 'non-judgemental' kind of observation.

Leaving this issue aside for the moment, it seems clear at least that with Rhys Davids' translation of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, 'mindfulness' soon became established as the only possible English translation of *sati*. To name but a few significant works, it is the translation used by Chalmers in his partial translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (1926), by Mrs C. A. F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward in their translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (1917–1930); by E. M. Hare and F. L. Woodward in their translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (1932–1936); and perhaps most significantly by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's in his highly influential

translation of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, first published in 1956 and reprinted many times.

So far we have primarily been considering the pioneering scholarly translations of early Buddhist texts. The influence on these of any perspective from actual Buddhist practice is limited, although we cannot rule out that Rhys Davids was influenced in his understanding of *satipaṭṭhāna* by his contact with monks in Ceylon. With Ñāṇamoli's *Path of Purification* (1964), however, we touch directly on the tradition of western monastic practitioners of Buddhism in general, and in particular on a tradition that has identified 'mindfulness' as the 'heart of Buddhist meditation', to use the title of Nyanaponika's important and influential book first published in 1954 (Nyanaponika 1962, 14). This is not the place to attempt to trace the history of this particular tradition in full. But what seems clear is that it is this tradition that lies behind the particular modern western reception of Buddhist meditation that has led to the adoption of both the term 'mindfulness' and certain practices in the context of modern psychotherapy. In broad terms the tradition can be traced from such Burmese meditation teachers as Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904–1982) and U Ba Khin (1899–1971); the former's instructions in meditation were one of the formative influences on Nyanaponika's own understanding of mindfulness and meditation.<sup>6</sup> Nyanaponika developed his initial interest in mindfulness meditation under the influence of two Ceylonese monks Kheminda Thera and Soma Thera. The latter published a translation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and its commentary in 1941 (Soma 1967) after completing a period of meditation practice in Burma in 1936–1937 and returning to Ceylon to spend a period at the Dodanduwa Island Hermitage established by Nyanatiloka (1878–1957) in 1911 (Nyanatusita and Hecker 2008, 36). Nyanaponika himself spent a period practising meditation in Burma with Mahāsi Sayādaw in the early 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

Nyanaponika in fact offers an account of mindfulness that is influenced by his understanding of the technical account of the process of perception (*citta-vīthi*) found in developed Theravāda systematic thought (*abhidhamma*). Mindfulness, he tells us, is no 'mystical' state; rather

In its elementary manifestation, known under the term 'attention', it is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness without which there cannot be perception of any object at all. (Nyanaponika 1962, 24)

Nyanaponika does not say which, if any, technical Pali term 'attention' corresponds to. In a note (1962, 112) he indicates that he is referring to a stage in perception known as *āvajjana*, 'turning towards (the object)'. Certainly in technical *abhidhamma* terms this is among the barest kinds of attention there is; curiously in *abhidhamma* terms the mental quality of *sati* is not in fact present at this stage in the process of perception, something that Nyanaponika, who certainly had a sound grasp of *abhidhamma*, must have been well aware of. What he is perhaps referring to is the *abhidhamma* understanding of 'bringing to mind' or 'paying attention' (*manasikāra*), which is a feature that is understood to be present in all acts of awareness; moreover, how we initially turn our attention

towards objects of perception, despite its being below the threshold of conscious control, is understood to play a crucial part in conditioning our subsequent emotional responses to objects of perception; that is, as governing whether we do in fact respond with 'mindfulness'.<sup>8</sup> What Nyanaponika seems to be suggesting here is that the manner of our initial attention to objects of perception is the seed of mindfulness. Although he goes on to distinguish clearly between this initial 'attention' and 'right mindfulness' (*sammāsati*), he nevertheless subsequently focuses on 'Mindfulness in its specific aspect of "bare attention" ' (Nyanaponika 1962, 30).

In discussing 'bare attention' Nyanaponika contrasts it with our habit of judging what we perceive from the point of view of self-interest; rather than being concerned with a disinterested assessment of how things truly are, we will see objects 'in the light of added subjective judgements' that are bound up with our preconceived sense of ourselves, our personality and ego (Nyanaponika 1962, 32–4). For Nyanaponika, bare attention is a way of beginning to counteract this process whereby with every act of awareness we reinforce certain habits of mind; it is a way of beginning to see things from a different perspective.

Nyanaponika's understanding of mindfulness as bare attention appears to have been widely influential. And while he may have been careful to present it as merely an elementary aspect of the practice of mindfulness and to distinguish it from a fuller understanding of mindfulness proper—right mindfulness as a constituent of the eightfold path—there has sometimes been a tendency for those who have written on mindfulness subsequently to assimilate it to 'bare attention'.

The tradition was disseminated and developed in the West by a number of meditation teachers and writers, including Jack Kornfield (b. 1945) and Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944), to name but two. It is, then, a tradition of Buddhist meditation that bases itself on a particular approach to the *Satipatthāna Sutta* and identifies this approach as what is meant by the traditional Buddhist term 'insight' (*vipassanā*).

Jack Kornfield in his useful anthology of the teachings of 'living Buddhist masters' (including one woman, Achaan Naeb, lest the term 'master' be read as not gender inclusive) introduces mindfulness as 'the one quality above all others' that is 'key to practice' in the development of wisdom:

The most direct way to understand our life situation, who we are and how we operate, is to observe with a mind that simply notices all events equally. This attitude of non-judgmental, direct observation allows all events to occur in a natural way. By keeping attention in the present moment, we can see more and more clearly the true characteristics of our mind and body process. (Kornfield 1977, 13)

This provides a good example of an emerging working definition of 'mindfulness'. The key characteristics of this definition are that mindfulness is non-judgmental, direct observation of mind and body in the present moment, along with a claim that this kind of observation is peculiarly efficacious.

The use of Buddhist 'mindfulness' practices in the context of western clinical psychotherapy emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s and is associated above all with the name of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his work at the Stress Reduction Clinic (founded in 1979) and Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (founded 1995) at the University of Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn's 'mindfulness-based stress reduction' (MBSR) in turn fed into the development of 'mindfulness-based cognitive therapy' (MBCT) (Segal, Williams and Teasdale 2002). The direct Buddhist influences on Kabat-Zinn's approach to MBSR are clear from a number of his writings: certainly the tradition of insight and mindfulness meditation we have been discussing above is one of the major influences, although he also cites other Buddhist meditation practices and his early papers refer to contemplative traditions other than Buddhist.<sup>10</sup> Over the last 20 years the use of MBSR and MBCT as a clinical psychotherapy in America and Europe has grown considerably. In this context, the Buddhist origins of mindfulness, although not exactly a secret, are often underplayed or even not mentioned at all; the approach is practical and what is emphasised is the therapeutic usefulness of mindfulness rather than its Buddhist credentials, although these are sometimes alluded to. Thus in the introduction to *The mindful way through depression* (2007), Williams, Teasdale, Segal, and Kabat-Zinn talk of the clinical use of meditative practices,

to cultivate a particular form of awareness, known as mindfulness, which originated in the wisdom traditions of Asia. These practices . . . have been part of Buddhist culture for millennia . . . We soon discovered that the combination of Western cognitive science and Eastern practices was just what was needed to break the cycle of recurrent depression. (Williams et al. 2007, 5)

Segal, Williams and Teasdale's earlier *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* (2002), on the other hand, mentions 'Buddhist mindfulness meditation' only once in passing (2002, 44), although it does recommend for further reading at the conclusion guides to (Buddhist) insight meditation.<sup>11</sup>

How one views the adaptation of Buddhist mindfulness practice to a modern clinical context for the treatment of stress and depression will depend on one's particular perspective. From one sort of Buddhist perspective, the abstraction of mindfulness from its context within a broad range of Buddhist meditative practices might seem like an appropriation and distortion of traditional Buddhism that loses sight of the Buddhist goal of rooting out greed, hatred and delusion. From a different Buddhist perspective, it might seem to be an example of 'skill in means' (*upāya-kauśalya*): it provides a way of giving beings the opportunity to make a first and important initial step on the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. From yet another perhaps still Buddhist perspective that might be characterised as 'modernist', it strips Buddhism of some of its unnecessary historical and cultural baggage, focusing on what is essential and useful. A non-Buddhist perspective might regard the removal of the unnecessary historical and cultural baggage as finally revealing the useful essence that had hitherto been obscured by the Buddhist religion. Finally we might regard

the coming together of practices derived from Buddhism with the methods of modern western cognitive science as affording a true advance that supersedes and renders redundant the traditional Buddhist practices. As observers of social history, we might also see it as an example of a change from a cultural situation where we turn to religion to heal our souls to one where we turn to medicine and science.

This is not the place to consider the significance of all these possible attitudes in depth. Whatever attitude we adopt towards it, a particular understanding of and approach towards mindfulness has emerged in the context of MBSR and MBCT; and given the acknowledged Buddhist provenance of mindfulness in general, it seems worth considering whether its translation from ancient India to the modern clinical 'mindfulness centre' has been straightforward or what, if anything, may have been lost in translation.

A full consideration of this question would require discussion not only of the understanding of mindfulness, but of the specific practices used in both the Buddhist and clinical context; this is beyond the scope of the present discussion which will be limited to certain aspects of the understanding of mindfulness.

While some recent discussions of mindfulness in the context of modern psychotherapy problematize its definition, perhaps the most often cited definition is Kabat-Zinn's own succinct 'operational' definition: 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.'<sup>12</sup> A slightly fuller definition that is also cited is:

[A] kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. (Bishop et al. 2004, 232)

As I have already suggested, the essential elements of such a definition can be seen in the characterizations of mindfulness that have emerged in the explicitly Buddhist context of writings by Nyanaponika and Kornfield.

To find a similarly succinct definition of mindfulness in the texts of early Buddhism is not so easy. Such definitions as there are are rather different in character. In response to the question 'what is the faculty of *sati*?' we are told that someone who has *sati* 'possesses perfect *sati* and understanding: he is someone who remembers and recollects what was done and said long before' (S V 197–98).

Another early response to a direct question about the characteristics of *sati* is found in the *Milindapañha* (Mil 37–38) where it is explained that *sati* has two characteristics (*lakkhana*): 'calling to mind' (*apilāpana*) and 'taking possession' (*upagañhana*). Thus *sati* is explained as calling to mind wholesome and unwholesome qualities such that the meditator is in a position to know which qualities are the ones he should pursue and which are the ones he should not; this is likened to the manner in which a king's treasurer constantly reminds the king of his glory and property. Secondly, *sati* is said to follow the outcome of qualities and so to know which qualities are beneficial and which are not with the result that the meditator can remove those which are not helpful and take possession of those



which are helpful; this is likened to the manner in which a king's adviser keeps the king informed about what is and is not beneficial.

The early Abhidhamma literature (see Dhs 16) lists a number of terms that are intended to illustrate the nature of *sati* and which are of some interest: recollection (*anussati*), recall (*paṭissati*), remembrance (*saraṇatā*), keeping in mind (*dhāraṇatā*), absence of floating (*apilāpanatā*), absence of forgetfulness (*asammussanatā*).

These ancient definitions and the Abhidhamma list of terms seem to be rather at odds with the modern clinical psychotherapeutic definition of mindfulness, and even perhaps with the more recent Buddhist definitions of mindfulness offered by way of exposition of the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Of course, such differences in the definition of mindfulness might simply reflect the fact that there have been in the history of Buddhist thought and practice somewhat different and even conflicting approaches to and conceptions of mindfulness. While not wishing to discount this possibility, I think it is also possible to suggest ways in which these early definitions complement what we can glean from other early Buddhist discussions of mindfulness; in this way we can perhaps arrive at a fuller and more complete appreciation of the early Buddhist understanding.

The key element in the early definitions, it seems to me, is that they take the sense of *sati* as 'remembering' seriously. The basic idea here is straightforward: if one is instructed to observe the breath and be aware whether it is a long breath or short breath, one needs to remember to do this, rather than forget after a minute, five minutes, 30 minutes, and so forth. That is, one has to remember that what it is one should be doing is remembering the breath. There is a further dimension to this remembering implied by my use of the expression 'what one is supposed to be doing'. That is in the specific context in which the practice of mindfulness is envisaged by ancient Buddhist texts, in remembering that one should remember the breath, one is remembering that one should be doing a meditation practice; in remembering that one should be doing a meditation practice, one is remembering that one is a Buddhist monk; in remembering that one is a Buddhist monk, one is remembering that one should be trying to root out greed, hatred and delusion. Conversely, in forgetting the breath, one is forgetting that one is doing a meditation practice; in forgetting that one is doing a meditation practice, one is forgetting that one is a Buddhist monk; in forgetting that one is a Buddhist monk one is forgetting that one is trying to root out greed, hatred and delusion. This seems to me to make sense of such traditional Buddhist meditations as recollection (*anussati*) of the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, which the texts themselves seem keen to include within the broad framework of mindfulness practice.

I do not want to suggest by this that mindfulness is conceived in terms of a series of conscious and discursive reflections along these lines, but simply that ancient Buddhist texts understand the presence of mindfulness as in effect reminding us of who we are and what our values are. Incidentally, despite the



definitions of mindfulness used in the context of MBSR and MBCT, it seems that certainly in practice mindfulness must have something of this quality here also, otherwise it is difficult to see how a patient would have the motivation to sustain the exercises in mindfulness.

There is a further aspect of *sati* as remembering that is, I think, hinted at by especially the *Milindapañha* characterization of *sati* as calling to mind various good and bad, beneficial and unbeneficial qualities. That is, when, for example, I am happy, it is difficult to remember what it feels like to be unhappy; conversely when I am unhappy, it is difficult to remember what it feels like to be happy. In such circumstances, I will be more likely to identify with passing moods and feelings, which may result in their being reinforced and in my being thrown mentally off course or balance. If on, the other hand, I remember when I am happy what it feels like to be unhappy, I am less likely to be thrown when the feeling passes, and more likely to be sympathetic to those around who are not so happy. If I remember when I am unhappy what it feels like to be happy, I may be more able to cope with the feeling until it passes, and less resentful of those around me who are happy. In similar vein, if I lack mindfulness, I may forget how particular patterns of behaviour make me feel and so repeat them. But if I truly remember that last time I acted in such a way it resulted in unpleasant feelings, then it may become more difficult to continue to indulge those patterns of behaviour. Such observations allow us to make some sense of a traditional Buddhist emphasis on *sati* as 'remembering'. It is perhaps worth noting in this context the findings cited by Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002, 28–30) that suggest a significant factor in the relapse into depression may be the way in which someone vulnerable to depression tends to get lost in a sad mood, which may then provoke habitual patterns of negative thinking.

Two of the Abhidhamma terms given in explanation of mindfulness point towards mindfulness as something rather more than simply present-centered awareness of each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises. These terms are 'absence of floating' (*apilāpanatā*) and 'absence of forgetfulness' (*asammussanātā*). The former term is explained by a simile: absence of floating is to be contrasted with a state when the mind bobs about like a gourd floating on the surface of water; mindfulness, by contrast, plunges into the object of awareness.<sup>13</sup> The second term allows us to make a clearer connection with a semantic range of usage in English that parallels in good measure usage in Pali and Sanskrit. That is, absence of forgetfulness appears to refer not so much to having a good memory for facts and information, as to not being absentminded and forgetful. The term is related in Buddhist texts to two expressions in Pali, *mutṭhā sati* and *upatṭhitā sati*, that literally mean 'mindfulness that is confused' and 'mindfulness that is at hand', but which can perhaps be rendered more idiomatically and even exactly as 'absentmindedness' and 'presence of mind'.<sup>14</sup> Mindfulness for Buddhist texts, it seems, thus has something of the quality of being 'on the ball'.

Let us now turn to one of the classic developed Buddhist definitions of mindfulness, namely that found in the exegetical texts of the Theravāda tradition.

*Sati* is that by means of which [the qualities that constitute the mind] remember, or it itself is what remembers, or it is simply remembering. Its characteristic is not floating, its property absence of forgetting, its manifestation guarding or being face to face with an object of awareness; its basis is steady perception or the establishing of mindfulness of the body, and so on. Because of its being firmly set in the object of awareness, it should be seen as like a post and, because it guards the gates of the eye and other senses, as like a gatekeeper. (Vism XIV, 141)

We have already dealt with the aspects of remembering, absence of forgetting and not floating highlighted here; 'being face to face with an object of awareness' is straightforward in terms of the kind of definition of mindfulness found both in the context of modern insight meditation and MBSR and MBCT; seeing mindfulness as like a post because of its being firmly set in the object of awareness seems simply to reinforce its characteristic of not floating about.

Mindfulness's manifestation as 'guarding' and as 'like a gatekeeper' seems to allude to a passage describing the 'guarding of the gates of the senses' which is often repeated in the early texts as a prelude to the establishing of mindfulness and clear understanding:

And how does a monk guard the gates of the senses? In this, when he looks at a visible object with his eyes, he does not hold on to the general experience nor particular aspects. Since someone who lives with the sense of sight unchecked might be affected by longing and discontent, by bad, unwholesome qualities, he tries to practise checking the sense of sight; he guards it, and achieves restraint. When he hears a sound with his ears . . . smells a smell with his nose . . . tastes a taste with his tongue . . . touches an object with his body . . . is conscious of a thought in his mind, he does not grasp at the general experience nor at particular aspects. Since someone who lives with the mind unchecked might be affected by longing and discontent, by bad, unwholesome qualities, he tries to practise checking the mind; he guards it, and achieves restraint. (See, for example, D I 70)

A simile found elsewhere (S IV 194) likens mindfulness directly to a gatekeeper guarding a city (the body) with six gates (the senses). The characterization of mindfulness as guarding and as like a gatekeeper seems closely related to mindfulness in its capacities of remembering and presence of mind. The suggestion seems to be that if we have mindfulness then we will remember what it is that we should be doing in a given moment (watching the breath, say, or paying attention to posture), and thus when perceptions, feelings, states of mind and emotions that might interfere with this arise, we will have the presence of mind not to let them overcome our minds and take hold.

The statement in the standard Theravāda exegetical definition of mindfulness that its basis is 'steady perception' or 'the establishing of mindfulness of the body, and so on' situates the cultivation and development of mindfulness in the kinds of practice that are set out in the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta*. A full exposition of

the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is not possible in the present context, and I shall confine myself to a few observations.

In the first place, it would seem that the taking of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as a succinct manual of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation as opposed to calm (*samatha*) meditation is a modern Buddhist reading rather than a traditional one. Neither the term *vipassanā* nor *samatha* in fact occurs in the *Sutta*, while a number of other *Suttas* which elaborate the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* quite clearly integrate it with the practice of absorption (*jhāna*) and concentration (*samādhi*), which come to be seen as emblematic of *samatha* practice; the 'Discourse on mindfulness of the body' (M III, 88–99) presents *precisely* the practices set out in the section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* concerned with the body as a basis for the attainment of absorption. The stock description of the manner in which a monk watches body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and qualities as qualities in establishing mindfulness, comments that the monk 'overcomes his longing for and discontent with the world'. Buddhaghosa's fifth-century CE commentary on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* notes that this phrase can be understood as indicating the abandoning of the five hindrances—the basic obstacles to the attainment of absorption—by means of concentration (Gethin 2001, 49–53).<sup>15</sup> I am not here concerned with trying to establish an original and authentic interpretation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, only with establishing that there is clear evidence in the Pali sources of a traditional reading of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as setting out both calm and insight practice, and little explicit indication before the twentieth century that it has been read exclusively in terms of the way of insight.

That watching the body as body with mindfulness should involve overcoming one's longing for and discontent with the world might suggest that mindfulness is envisaged as something rather more sustained and developed than mere bare attention or present moment non-judgmental observation; it suggests that a prerequisite for true mindfulness is watching from the vantage point of a relatively still and peaceful state of mind.

It is possible that 'non-judgmental' should be interpreted as implying a relatively still and peaceful state of mind. This raises the question of what is meant by non-judgmental in the context of the MBSR and MBCT understanding of mindfulness. As we have seen, for Nyanaponika it is clear that what is problematic in the context of mindfulness are our habitual judgments and opinions about how we and others are; being non-judgmental is about making space for a different perspective on how things are. This clearly bears some comparison with the way in which in the context of MBCT 'non-judgmental' mindfulness might counteract the problem of the 'ruminative mind' (Segal, Williams and Teasdale 2002, 33–37). Yet from a traditional Theravāda Buddhist perspective an unqualified emphasis on mindfulness as 'non-judgmental' might be seen as implying that being non-judgmental is an end in itself and that all states of mind are somehow of equal value, that greed is as good as non-attachment, or anger as friendliness. In fact, in the context of MBSR and MBCT, being 'non-judgmental' seems largely to be advocated as a practical stance rather than a final vision of the nature of things,

while the question of the ultimate 'value' of our fleeting mental states takes us into complex areas of Buddhist thought and philosophy where different Buddhist traditions may express themselves differently. Yet something of a practical common ground of Buddhist psychology might be expressed by saying that although—or precisely because—the aim is to rid ourselves of greed, hatred and delusion, getting angry with and hating our own greed, hatred and delusion when they arise, or conversely, becoming pleased with and attached to our own non-attachment, friendliness and wisdom when they arise, is clearly something of a trap. And it is perhaps precisely this kind of practical approach that those who pioneered MBSR and MBCT intended to highlight by characterising mindfulness as 'non-judgmental'.

To return to the more general question of a possible distinction between proper mindfulness and simple observation of what is going on, this is perhaps also implied by the way in which the Buddhist definition quoted above draws attention to the fact that the basis of mindfulness is 'steady perception' or 'the establishing of mindfulness of the body, and so on'. That is, steady and clear observation, the bare practice of watching the body as body, do not of themselves guarantee or constitute the presence of real mindfulness; rather they set up the conditions that will conduce to its arising.

That mindfulness is seen as entailing the accomplishment of a sustained presence of mind is perhaps brought out by a particularly vivid simile (S V, 170). Mindfulness of the body is likened to the case of a man who must pay attention to a bowl brim full of oil that he is carrying on his head. The man must do this before a crowd that has gathered to watch the most beautiful girl of the land as she dances and sings; and as the man moves between the girl and the crowd with bowl on his head, he is followed by another man with a drawn sword who, if he spills so much as a drop of the oil, will cut off his head. In such circumstances, it is suggested, the man will pay very careful attention to the bowl of oil on his head and not be distracted by the crowd or girl; with a similar quality of attention the monk should cultivate mindfulness of the body.

I would like to conclude by making a few comments about the way in which mindfulness has been presented as the key practice of Buddhist meditation. As we have seen, this is linked first of all to the notion that it is insight meditation that is the quintessential form of Buddhist meditation and that it is the practice of mindfulness that lies at the heart of insight meditation. I have already suggested that this does not seem to reflect a traditional Theravāda perspective.<sup>16</sup> In the present context two further points seem worth making.

First, the singling out of the practice of mindfulness is in part based on a problematic translation of the characterization of the four ways of establishing mindfulness at the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as a path that is *ekāyana* (D II, 290; M I, 55). All the early English translations of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* opt for interpreting *ekāyana* as characterizing the four ways of establishing mindfulness as the *only* path leading to the purification of beings.<sup>17</sup> While the precise interpretation of the expression remains obscure, it seems clear that what it does

not mean is 'only', and that it probably means 'going to just one place' or 'single' as opposed to forked and can thus be rendered 'direct': 'this path leading to the purification of beings, namely the four ways of establishing mindfulness, is direct and clear' (Gethin 2001, 59–66).

Secondly, while the practice of mindfulness is certainly regarded as important in early Buddhist accounts of meditation, it is nonetheless always presented as one among several qualities that need to be equally balanced. This is nowhere more so than in the context of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself.

In a number of places in the Nikāyas the Buddhist path is summed up in terms of accomplishing the four ways of establishing of mindfulness through abandoning the five hindrances, and then developing the seven constituents of awakening.<sup>18</sup> Indeed it is possible to read the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* precisely as an expansion of this short statement in so far as the fourth and final stage of establishing mindfulness (watching qualities as qualities) involves first seeing that the five hindrances have been abandoned and then culminates in the development of the seven constituents of awakening and the understanding of the four noble truths: suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. That final awakening is seen precisely as a function of the seven constituents of awakening working in balance rather than as issuing from just the practice of mindfulness, say, or of some other quality, is well illustrated by a discussion of which of the seven constituents of awakening one should try to cultivate when the mind is depressed or dull (*līna*), and which one should try to cultivate when the mind is excited or overactive (*uddhatta*). When the mind is depressed, then is not the right time to develop tranquillity, concentration and equanimity; to do so would be like throwing wet grass on to a small fire that one wants to blaze up. It is, however, the right time to develop investigation of qualities, strength, and joy—just as one should throw dry grass on to a small fire that one wants to blaze up. When the mind is excited, then is not the time to develop investigation of qualities, strength and joy; to do so would be like throwing dry grass on to a great fire that one wants to put out. It is, however, the right time to develop tranquillity, concentration and equanimity—just as one should throw wet grass on to a great fire that one wants to put out. As for the constituent of awakening that is mindfulness, it is appropriate to cultivate this in all of the above circumstances. Thus while mindfulness is distinctive in so far as it can help whether the mind is dull or overactive, it nevertheless remains just one of seven constituents of awakening.

The MBSR and MBCT conception of mindfulness derives in significant part from a particular modern Buddhist tradition of mindfulness. From the perspective of the account of *sati* found in early Buddhist sources, this modern conception does seem to centre on something of a minimalist definition of mindfulness. The traditional Buddhist account of mindfulness plays on aspects of remembering, recalling, reminding and presence of mind that can seem underplayed or even lost in the context of MBSR and MBCT. Yet this may in part simply be a consequence of the particular succinct *definitions* of mindfulness highlighted in the context MBSR

and MBCT. For the Buddhist tradition and for MBSR and MBCT, 'mindfulness' is part of a set of practices, and practices can have particular effects whatever our preconceived ideas and theories about them. That is, in its application in a clinical context, further aspects of mindfulness may well manifest and be relevant.

## NOTES

**Abbreviations:** A = *Aṅguttara Nikāya*; As = *Atthasālinī*; D = *Dīgha Nikāya*; Dhs = *Dhammasaṅgani*; M = *Majjhima Nikāya*; Mil = *Milindapañha*; Nett = *Nettipakarāṇa*; S = *Samyutta Nikāya*; Vism = *Visuddhimagga*. Editions are those of the Pali Text Society

1. The seventh volume containing the entries for *smar* and *smṛti* was published between 1872 and 1875.
2. Gogerly's translation of portions of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* as found in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya (Vin I 8–14) was first published as part of a piece entitled 'On Buddhism' (Gogerly 1845, 23–25); it was subsequently reprinted in Gogerly (1908, 65–66), and is referred to in Rhys Davids (1881, 144).
3. This 1881 translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* was reprinted, apparently without any modification, in Rhys Davids (1910, 71–191); for these translations see 85, 89, 130 ('intellectual activity'), 130 ('thought'), 128, 129 ('earnest meditations'). T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Being a sketch of the life and teachings of Gautama, the Buddha* was first published in 1877 (London) and subsequently revised and reprinted many times; I have only had access to an 1882 edition (London: SPCK) in which he refers to sati by way of 'right mindfulness' (108), 'four earnest meditations' (172) and 'recollection' (173).
4. He translates *sato sampajāno* as 'mindful and self possessed' throughout.
5. Rhys Davids (1910, 322–46).
6. See Bodhi (1995, 12); Nyanaponika (1962, 85–107).
7. Bodhi (1995, 12). Other works which shaped the early western Buddhist reception of mindfulness include Shattock 1958 (which gives an account of the author's training in the Mahāsi Sayādaw insight method), and Thích Nhất Hạnh (1976).
8. 'But what determines this impulsion with respect to wholesomeness or unwholesomeness? Adverting and determining. For when at [the point of] adverting [the mind] has adverted appropriately and at [the point of] determining [the mind] has determined appropriately, it cannot be that an unwholesome impulsion will occur; [and similarly] when at [the point of] adverting [the mind] has adverted inappropriately and at [the point of] determining [the mind] has determined inappropriately, it cannot be that a wholesome impulsion will occur.' (As 277–78: *idaṃ pana javanam kusalattāya vā akusalattāya vā ko niyāmeti ti? āvajjanam c' eva voṭṭhappanañ ca. āvajjanena hi yoniso āvajjite voṭṭhappanena yoniso vavatthāpīte javanam akusalam*

*bhavissatī ti atthānam etaṃ. āvajjanena ayoniso āvajjite voṭṭhappanena ayoniso vavathāpīte javanaṃ kusalaṃ bhavissatī ti pi atthānam etaṃ ubhayena pana yoniso āvajjite vavathāpīte ca javanaṃ kusalaṃ hoti, ayoniso akusalan ti veditabbaṃ.*)

9. See Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1993). Interestingly OED ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)) now cites a specialized use of 'mindfulness': 'Esp. with reference to Yoga philosophy and Buddhism: the meditative state of being both fully aware of the moment and of being self-conscious of and attentive to this awareness; a state of intense concentration on one's own thought processes; self-awareness'. One of the earliest citations it gives for this usage is Rowe (1983), a book by a clinical psychologist about the treatment of depression; the passage cited (p. 182) comes from a section about the use of mindfulness meditation in dealing with depression.
10. For a recent discussion of the Buddhist influences on Kabat-Zinn, see Gilpin (2008, 232). In addition to Theravāda 'Insight Meditation', Kabat-Zinn (1982, 34) and Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, and Burney (1985, 165) also cite Soto Zen, and yogic practices expressed in the writings of Krishnamurti, Vimila Thakar, and Nisargadatta Maharaj.
11. Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002, 325) refers to Goldstein and Kornfield's *Seeking the heart of wisdom: The path of insight meditation*.
12. Kabat-Zinn, (1994, 4); cited, for example, by Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002, 40).
13. As 147, 405; for a fuller discussion of the term *apilāpanatā* see Gethin (2001, 38–39).
14. Cf. Anālayo (2003, 48).
15. For discussion of mindfulness in the context of *samatha* see Kuan (2008, 58–80).
16. On this see also Cousins (1996).
17. We find 'the one and only path' (Rhys Davids 1910, 327); 'this is the only way' (Soma 1967, 1); 'there is this one way' (Horner 1954, 71).
18. D II 83; III 101; S V 108, 160–1; A III 387; V 195; Nett 94; see Gethin (2001, 58–9, 169, 172, 258).

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