

Mindfulness contextualized: the Buddhist tradition

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Rutting elephants roaming wild do not cause as much devastation in this world as the roaming elephant, the mind, let free, creates...

But if the roaming elephant, the mind, is tethered on every side by the cord of mindfulness, every danger subsides, complete prosperity ensues.

Śāntideva (Bodhicaryāvatāra, 5, 2-3)

Mindfulness has been a cornerstone of Buddhist practice for two and half millennia. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the father of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), saw his work as introducing the Buddha's teachings to help alleviate suffering to those who otherwise might not access it:

'I hoped that *Full Catastrophe Living* [Kabat-Zinn's seminal book describing MBIs] would embody the dharma essence of the Buddha's teachings, made accessible to mainstream Americans facing stress, pain and illness.'¹

He used the term 'mindfulness' as an umbrella word to describe the work:

'... and link explicitly with a universal dharma that is co-extensive, if not identical with, the teachings of the Buddha, the Buddha-dharma.'

What is mindfulness? Kabat-Zinn's working definition is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. This definition has been widely taken up and is sometimes taken to exhaustively describe what mindfulness is. In Buddhist practice, mindfulness is a much richer term. I will therefore describe some of the meanings and the connotations of mindfulness, as well as looking at the context in which mindfulness occurs. I will then explore some of the implications for teaching MBIs. In particular I will draw on a helpful series of papers brought together as *Mindfulness: diverse perspectives on its meaning, origins and applications*¹ as well as Anālayo's excellent commentary on the satipaṭṭhāna sutta².

¹ Mindfulness: diverse perspectives on its meaning, origins and applications (2013). Edited by Mark Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn

² Satipaṭṭhāna. The direct path to realization (2004) Anālayo

Rhys Davids, in 1881, was the first person to translate the Buddhist technical term *sati* as mindfulness. He had been a civil servant in Sri Lanka, later becoming Professor of Pali at the University of London and the founder of the Pali Text Society. Earlier translators had been unsure how to render the term *sati*. Although *sati* is etymologically related to memory, Rhys Davids regarded this on its own as an inadequate and misleading translation: '*Sati* here implies 'memory, recollection, calling-to-mind, being-aware-of, certain specified facts' especially impermanence'.

Sati refers to being present - the opposite of absent-mindedness. It can be thought of as presence of mind. This supports its function of recollection, such as recalling a teaching or remembering what one is supposed to be doing. In Buddhist practice this could mean remembering that one is trying to focus on the breath, doing which helps one remember that one is meditating, which helps one to remember that one is a Buddhist practitioner, which in turn helps one to recall that one is trying to overcome greed, hatred and spiritual ignorance in order to gain Enlightenment. In practising MBIs this could mean recollecting why you had decided to sign up for the course (e.g. to help alleviate stress), which might help with motivation to stay engaged in the course.

There are a number of images used to describe what mindfulness is like. One is of a cowherd watching the crops. When the crops are still growing great attention is needed to ensure that the cattle don't trample on the crops. Once the crops have been harvested, the cowherd can relax under a tree, watching the cows at a distance. Mindfulness can be thought of having a calm and relaxed broad perspective, like the cowherd after the harvest. Another image also implying perspective and detachment is likening mindfulness to being at the top of a tower. Mindfulness is also likened to a surgeon's probe. The probe tests an area, preparing it for surgery, just as mindfulness prepares the mind, especially for the arising of wisdom. Practising mindfulness is like carrying a bowl of oil on one's head, in the sense that it implies balance. Another image is the gatekeeper of a city who lets in only genuine citizens. So mindfulness guards the mind as well as having a sense of perspective. Finally mindfulness is likened to a strong post to which is tied a wild animal. Mindfulness helps to tame the mind; it has a quality of stabilising and unshakability.

Sati is often linked to a related term, *sampajañña*, which means 'clearly knowing'. The compound word, *satisampajañña*, refers to the intelligent processing of data leading to wisdom. Thus it is the illuminating or awakening aspect of mindfulness. *Sampajañña* has four functions. Firstly there is the purpose of the action, for example, what the purpose of talking is at any given moment. Secondly, and following from this, is the suitability of an action for spiritual practice. For instance, the Buddha advised that speech should relate to such topics as contentment, seclusion and wisdom. Thirdly is clear comprehension of 'pasture'. By pasture is meant one's meditation practice; this aspect of *sampajañña* would see how an action supported one's meditation. In particular it implies practising sense restraint in order to avoid dwelling on stimuli that could provoke craving or mental proliferation. Fourthly is non-delusion, which refers to the wisdom aspect of *sampajañña*, discerning the true nature of reality.

Mindfulness is associated with the ethically wholesome. In the Questions to King Milinda, *sati* is described as having two qualities: 'calling to mind' and 'taking possession'. Calling to mind refers to recollecting whether a mental state is skilful or not, so as to know which to pursue and which to abandon. Taking possession refers to following the outcome of a mental state to see whether it is beneficial or not, and to take possession of those mental states that are beneficial.

The Abhidhamma categorises the types of mental events that appear in our minds. Mental states are divided into those that are ethically skilful and unskilful, then further categorised into whether they are always present (universals) in a skilful or unskilful mind state. According to this categorisation *sati* is a skilful universal, that is, it occurs as part of every skilful mind state, along with 18 other skilful universals such as confidence, respect, conscience, non-greed, non-hatred, and equanimity. This implies that mindfulness is a type of attention that is confident, benevolent, balanced and fundamentally wholesome.

The satipaṭṭhāna sutta described the principal objects of mindfulness. Satipaṭṭhāna means attending with mindfulness. The four satipaṭṭhānas are body, feelings, mental states and dhammas. Mindfulness of body is the foundation for the subsequent satipaṭṭhānas by paying attention to bodily sensations. Feelings in this context refer to the hedonic tone of experience, that is, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. It is also divided into worldly and spiritual, that is, whether it tends to conduce to worldly or spiritual mental states. Mindfulness of mental states means recognising the particular mind states that arise and whether they are skilful or unskilful. Dhammas here mean the frames of reference; teachings such as the five hindrances and the four noble truths that are used to guide one and apply to one's experience.

Regarding its context, mindfulness has a key place in various formulations of the path of training. Mindfulness is one of the five spiritual faculties. As a sequence, mindfulness appears in the middle. First there is confidence, which is about initial motivation and going forth, followed by energy, which is learning to follow the skilful and practise contentment. Mindfulness then refers in particular to sense restraint and mindfulness of the body. This is followed by concentration, here meaning absorption in meditation, and finally wisdom. The five spiritual faculties can also be cultivated concurrently. In this mindfulness is seen as central, having a balancing function in relation to the two pairs of confidence-wisdom, and energy-concentration. In the early stages, *sati* provides energy to overcome distractions, and in later stages leads to calm, concentrated states of mind. As the central factor of the seven factors of awakening, mindfulness also has a balancing function. Associated with the first three factors of investigation of mental states, energy and joy, it combats a dull mind. With the last three factors of tranquillity, concentration and equanimity, it balances over-excitement to lead to a calm state of mind. As one of the limbs of the noble eightfold path, right mindfulness is especially associated with two of the other limbs: right effort and right view. The implication is that correct mindfulness includes an element of effort (especially in terms of supporting wholesome mental states) and of understanding, such as of impermanence or that actions have consequences. As the Buddha approached his death, as though to underline its importance, he kept

reiterating one of the simplest formulations - the threefold way of ethics, concentration and wisdom. Mindfulness is key to all three stages. We can explore the implications for teaching MBIs by looking at each of these three stages.

According to Kabat-Zinn, ethics is implicit in MBIs. Instructors are expected to take personal responsibility for behaving ethically in their personal and professional lives. He cites the Hippocratic Oath as guiding instructors: first do no harm, and putting patients' needs first. He suggests that ethics are conveyed to patients through how instructors embody ethical behaviour in their own lives and in how they relate to patients. Ethics and mindfulness mutually support each other. One who is mindful will tend to act ethically. However, in addition, according to Buddhism, deliberate cultivation of ethical behaviour will augment mindfulness. For example if we lie, we may be liable to push it out of our awareness, dulling our mindfulness. Deliberate acts of loving kindness may boost our mindfulness. Teachers of MBIs may be reluctant to espouse a particular moral code, wishing to appear value-free, yet in doing so they may be missing out on the benefits that could accrue from making ethics explicit and actively cultivating wholesome states of mind and actions stemming from skilful mental states.

Mindfulness supports concentration, even though concentration is not stressed (for good reasons) in MBIs. Buddhism gives detailed accounts of levels of concentration and how to work with them. Some concentrated states of mind can be unusual, unexpected and even frightening to those not used to them. Even with meditation novices, deep, concentrated states of mind can sometimes occur - so called beginner's mind. Having familiarity with these states may give instructors more confidence in responding to the experiences of patients they are teaching.

Teasdale and Chakalson¹ suggest that there are three main strategies by which mindfulness can help to transform suffering: changing the content of experience; changing how the contents are processed; and changing the view of the contents. Changing the content of experience may be achieved by redirecting the focus of attention to somewhere that is less likely to give rise to suffering, for example bringing the attention back to the breath. This strategy is relatively easy to describe and may not need much training of the instructor. The second approach is like applying existing lenses to our experience in a new way, for example through cultivating an attitude of acceptance and turning towards experience, especially when it is painful. This is more demanding and requires more experienced teachers. The third strategy is like applying a new set of lenses. This could include seeing experience as being impermanent and insubstantial. As well as requiring more training (like the second strategy), it implies an understanding of the wisdom dimension of mindfulness.

To conclude, an understanding of the Buddhist background to mindfulness may help to flesh out what happens in practising mindfulness in MBIs to better respond to patients and their experience of practising mindfulness. It may suggest alternative routes to help alleviate suffering, such as through ethics and wisdom. Elements of this are finding their way into the teaching of MBIs, such as the explicit cultivation of self-compassion. Finally,

it may help to generalise an understanding of suffering and its roots. This could lead to a sense of patients and instructors both being in the endeavour together. Going beyond the particularities of the suffering that led them to embark on an MBI course, a broader understanding could help patients to see what they are learning as tools for life that can support and accompany them well beyond the confines of the course and apply to new areas of suffering as their life unfolds.