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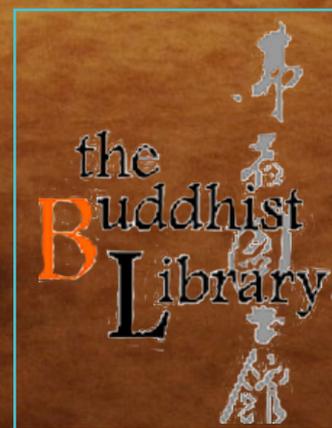
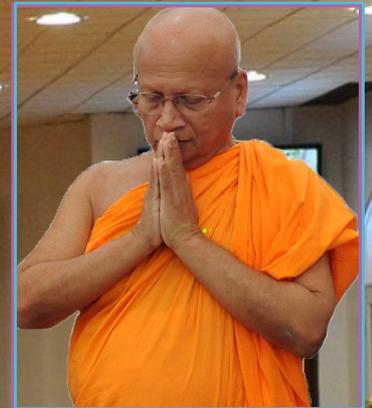


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If my sickness is of benefit to living beings, let me be sick.

If my death would benefit them, may I die.

But if my recovery would help, may I be cured.

*Bless me to accept whatever happens with **JOY** and use it as my **PATH**.*

Gyelsay Togmay Sangpo



Article

Mindfulness – Spiritual Cultivation vs. Secular Applications

by Venerable Fa Xun

Introduction

Mindfulness as a concept and practice occupies a significant place in the overall scheme of Buddhist meditative training. It is practised and emphasised in all Buddhist schools/traditions and is considered a key aspect of the path to realisation and liberation. In recent decades, there has been a widespread use of mindfulness in the west, starting with Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction and various forms of therapy embracing mindfulness have since evolved. Mindfulness has now become even more widely used in secular fields such as education, management, dieting, parenting and the like. I would like to examine the practice of mindfulness within a traditional Buddhist context with reference to the sutras. I will also examine the modern description and application of meditation practice in secular settings. Finally, I will discuss what mindfulness would become if taken out of the whole scheme of Buddhism.

In the Buddha's teaching, *Dharma* is the ultimate truth of things. It is directly visible and the place where it is to be realised is within oneself. This liberating truth has to be known through practice, not just accepting on faith or belief in authority of the teacher or thinking through deduction and inferences. Practitioners have to live a *holy* or *spiritual life* that involves training in ethical conduct and meditative techniques culminating in wisdom and realisation.

The *Sangha* is the community of monastics who not only preserve the teachings but also live the spiritual life as prescribed by the Buddha.

The practice of mindfulness has one motivating agenda – the desire for awakening, as part of the path to its ending (SN 51.15). The role of mindfulness is to keep the mind properly

grounded in the present moment in a way that will keep it on the path towards liberation. As such, the teachings and practice of mindfulness were taught to, and by, monastics. Practitioners need to turn away from society and towards the woods in order to practise mindfulness.

In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, MN 118, the Buddha said – '*And how, monks, is breathing mindfulness, cultivated? ... Here, monks, a monk goes to a forest, or the roots of a tree or an empty place and sits, folding his legs in a cross-legged position, making his body straight and sets up mindfulness in front of him.* (*Ānāpānasati Sutta* quoted in *Shaw*, 2006, p. 153).

With Kabat-Zinn's introduction of mindfulness-based stress reduction (*MBSR*), mindfulness practices are taught in secular forms that do not require adherence to religious beliefs (Duerr, 2004) and various forms of therapy embracing mindfulness have evolved such as *Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy* (Segal et al, 2002) and *Dialectical Behavioural Therapy* or DBT (Linehan, 1993).

Roots of Modern Day Mindfulness Practices

The source of mindfulness practices used and taught in these approaches has been credited to Buddhist roots (Huxter in *Einstein*). In DBT, mindfulness is defined as a *copying skill*.

These skills are broken into 3 '*what*' skills - observing, describing and participating with experience, and 3 '*how*' skills - non-judgment, focusing on one thing at a moment and being skilful. There are various connections between DBT and Buddhism (Linehan, 1993), one of which is how DBT uses a dialectical

view of reality and human behaviour to direct therapy. There are 3 features (a) interdependence, (b) balance and transformation and (c) change. These features are quite similar to the Buddhist characteristics of existence (Huxter in *Einstein*).

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is basically a reformulation of MBSR. It combines MBSR with elements of cognitive based theory and empirically based theory. One strong similarity to Buddhism is the MBCT description of meta-cognitive insight, that is, as events in the mind (Teasdale et al, 2002, p. 286). Instead of being caught-up with the contents of the thoughts, it shifts the focus to the relationship with the thought. In other words, to see thought as thought, they are not real, not facts to be believed. In doing so, MBCT aims to short-circuit the ruminative cognitive-effective processing and hence, the self-escalation of depressive thinking (Huxter in *Einstein*, p.50).

Although these practices have their roots in Buddhism, within the secular practice, there is a tendency to distance them from Buddhism in order to make mindfulness scientifically acceptable and culturally relevant (Huxter in *Einstein*, p. 44). Mindfulness has often been defined as (1) awareness of the present experience with acceptance (Germer et al, 2005), (2) open or receptive attention to, and awareness of on-going events and experience (Brown & Ryan, 2004, p.45). The key elements are 'awareness', 'present moment', 'being open', "receptive" and "non-judgemental". Mindfulness, as it is understood in Buddhism, is a richer concept than thus far understood and applied in secular fields.

Definition of Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness? What is its relationship to mind consciousness? Mindfulness is translated from the Pāli word sati.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, mind is 'the faculty of consciousness and thought, a person's ability to think and reason, the intellect, a person's memory, attention, will and determination' and consciousness is the 'awareness by the mind of itself and

the world, one's awareness or perception of something.' While sati is translated as mindfulness in English, it is translated into Chinese as 念 which is made up of the radical 今 which means now and the radical 心 which means heart. In essence, it means the present heart (mind). Pāli words relating to mind such as citta and manasikāra are commonly translated as heart in Chinese.

Where is mindfulness located - in the heart or the mind? Within the secular fields, scientists and psychologists have different opinions and viewpoints on what the mind and consciousness are or are not and there is a continuing debate as to the nature of the mind as distinct from the brain and consciousness itself (Bloom et al, 2009, p.16).

As language affects the way we think and the way we think affects language use, it will affect the way we understand and interpret mindfulness. Hence, mindfulness has been treated and applied differently between eastern (Buddhism) and western secular applications.

From the Buddhist perspective, mind is certainly not equal to the brain. The brain is a physical organ whereas the mind is not. According to Ven. H. Gunaratana, *sati* is an activity and is pre-symbolic whereas a word is symbolic; devised out of the symbolic levels of the mind. The actual (mindful) experience lies beyond words and above symbols (Gunaratana, 2002). Within all Buddhist traditions, regardless of languages (Mandarin, Tibetan, Pāli), there is a common understanding that *sati* as 'intrinsic awareness', is non-physical and thus distinct from any body organs, be they the brain or heart (Goleman, 2003, p.212). For example, in breathing meditation, a meditator is mindful of his breathing, the respiratory system is a physical organ, but his awareness - mindfulness of the breath - is non-physical.

Presence of Mind

The practice of mindfulness is well articulated in the *Satipatthāna Sutta* which is found in both the *Majjhima Nikāya*, text 118 and *Samyutta Nikāya*, chapter 54.

From the Buddhist perspective, mindfulness refers to presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness, yet such 'intrinsic awareness' involved in mindfulness differs profoundly from the mundane mode of consciousness. While all consciousness involves awareness (sense of knowing), the practice of mindful awareness is applied at a special pitch. The mind is kept at the level of bare attention, a detached observation (without judgement) and in the present moment (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2011). The mind is trained to remain in the present, which is ardent, alert, open and quiet.

Accordingly, there are four foundations (or objects) of mindfulness - body, feeling, mind, and phenomena.

And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Herein, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. He dwells contemplating feeling in feelings ... states of mind in states of mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2011)

Mindfulness as a concept and practice, occupies a significant place in the overall scheme of Buddhist doctrine occurring in various Buddhist scriptures and in many contexts. Right *mindfulness* (*sammā-sati*) is one (aspect) of the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the extinction of suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path is traditionally divided into three interdependent divisions - ethics (right action, speech and livelihood), concentration/meditation (right mindfulness, effort, meditation), and wisdom (right view and understanding).

In right mindfulness, a prefix 'right' (*sammā*) is added to 'mindfulness' (*sati*). In the west, influenced by the Christian Old Testament, 'right' is tangled up with 'righteous', which has the connotation of judgement from an external authority. As discussed, language and culture affect the way we understand and interpret Buddhism. In Buddhism, (however), *sammā* has the sense of skillful/wholesome, leading towards genuine happiness and ultimately the awakening/liberation of beings.

Dimensions of Mindfulness

Kuan (2008) identifies the following dimensions of mindfulness in the early Buddhist texts - Pāli *Nikāyas* and the *Āgamas* preserved in the Chinese translation.

The first is *simple awareness*, a moment-to-moment application of bare attention without making value judgements on experienced content (Kuan, 2008, p.41). The mind is trained to remain in the present moment with all judgements and interpretations suspended. The task is simply to register whatever comes up in the mind as it is occurring, and then drop it. The whole process is a way of coming back into the present (here and now) without being carried away by distracting thoughts. Such simple awareness is believed to lead a practitioner to direct observation of selflessness of experience, i.e., there is nothing inherent in the 'self'.

The second dimension is *protective awareness* (Kuan, 2008, p.42). Mindfulness acts as a 'gatekeeper' that exercises sense restraint over the stimuli of the six sense faculties. When sensory stimuli are received, it does not simply register facts, the protective awareness of mindfulness will evaluate if the stimuli is conducive to wholesome states that in turn lead to genuine happiness or to unwholesome states.

In the *Taiso* (Chinese Tripitaka) 佛遺教經 (*The Discourse Of the Teaching Bequeathed by the Buddha - just before his Parinibbāna*), the Buddha told the monks, "If your power of attention is very great, though you fall among (conditions favouring) the five robbers of sense-desire, you will not be harmed by them, just as a warrior entering a battle well covered by armour has nothing to fear. Such is the meaning of unbroken attention." (Taisho, Cebeta 712, No. 389).

The third dimension Kuan identifies is *introspective awareness* (Kuan, 2008, p.51), where mindfulness acts as a kind of introspective vigilance. In this case, attention is skilfully directed towards counteracting negative mental states into positive ones and consequently leading

to happiness. The *Atthasālinī* states that when mindfulness arises, it searches well the courses which are, advantageous and disadvantageous: - *'these states are advantageous, those disadvantageous, these states are serviceable, those not serviceable'* - and then removes the disadvantageous and takes up the advantageous (*Atthasālinī*, Part IV, Chp 1, p.121).

The fourth dimension is deliberately forming conceptions (Kuan, 2008, p.52). Mindfulness is then seen as a recollection, recollecting 'virtuous objects' - wholesome and skilful such as the Four Spiritual Effort, Seven Base of Arahatsip and the Noble Eightfold Path. In doing so, it positively structures the mind, transforming the mind towards wholesomeness.

Mindfulness and Ethics

Relating the Noble Eightfold path to the four dimensions Kuan identifies, it will be problematic if mindfulness is removed from the whole matrix of Buddhism. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a reputable contemporary meditation master who spent 12 years meditating in a cave in the Himalayas, commented that being 'aware' of the 'present moment' and being 'non-judgemental', could not strictly be considered mindfulness. She gave an example of a bank robber being very attentive and conscious of his action, such 'awareness' and 'attentiveness' strictly could not be considered mindfulness because his motivation is unwholesome and based on greed and desire (Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, 2011, p.98).

From the Buddhist perspective, being open, receptive and non-judgemental does not mean ethically neutral. The prefix 'right' (*sammā*) suggests that one needs to make an ethical judgement of what is considered wholesome/skilful and unwholesome/unskilful.

In *The Questions of King Milinda*, Nagasena highlighted the characteristics of mindfulness:

As mindfulness, O King, springs up in his heart, he repeats over the good and evil, right and wrong, slight and important, dark and

light qualities, and those that resemble them

... this is serenity and this insight, this is wisdom and this emancipation. Thus does the recluse follow after those qualities that are desirable, and not after those that are not; thus he cultivates those which ought to be practised, and not those which ought not ... he searches out the categories of good qualities and their opposites, saying to himself, "Such and such qualities are good, and such bad; such and such qualities helpful, and such are the reverse." Thus the recluse makes what is evil in himself disappear, and keeps up what is good. That is how keeping up is the mark of mindfulness (Davids trans, 1894, p.58).

Hence, one needs to consider if the action leads to suffering or genuine happiness. For Buddhism, certain mental states are considered to be toxic to the mind; they need to be clearly identified as 'poison' and abandoned. However, this is not to be seen as a process of avoidance or suppression. Mindfulness enables one to stay on the path, whereas wisdom (*paññā*) enables one to apply wise attention and discernment to transform destructive mental states to positive ones, leading one to genuine happiness.

While mindfulness is commonly known in contemporary writings as being aware of the present moment and being receptive and non-judgemental, from the Buddhist perspective, ethical judgement is necessary. Mindfulness is not practised in isolation (taken out of the whole matrix of Buddhism); the practice of mindfulness is connected with wholesome states of mind and need to be practised together with ethics and morality (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

Within western society, ethics and morality are often entangled with Christian ideas of commandments. They are often understood as a set of dogma to believe or commandments imposed on us. From the Buddhist perspective, morality (*sīla*) is not a set of rules imposed on us from an external authority that we follow out of fear of punishment, or uphold to please that external authority. Rather, it is a set of guidelines that govern the way we conduct our lives.

Voluntary Practice of Morality

Sīla is taken voluntarily; one abandons certain actions that bring harm to oneself and others and uphold certain actions knowing that such actions will make life more harmonious. One lives in accordance with these guidelines, knowing in the heart that ethical living - avoiding the unwholesome and nurturing the wholesome - will naturally lead to the bliss of blamelessness, free from psychological turmoil and resulting in a sense of lightness in our minds.

It also serves as a basis for further spiritual practices such as cultivating single-pointed concentration, wisdom, love and compassion (Chodron in Faxun, 2011, p.6). These guidelines are developed by the wise born from mindful observations and direct experience of suffering and happiness.

The concept of 'genuine happiness' (*sukkhā*) in Buddhism refers not to sensual pleasure arising from pleasurable stimuli. Rather it refers to a deep sense of blissfulness, rooted in ethical and spiritual maturation in line with virtue and 'underlies and suffuses all emotional states [and] embraces all vicissitudes of life.' (Wallace, 2007, p.2).

Traditionally, mindfulness was taught to, and by, the monastics with the aim of achieving enlightenment. Today, mindfulness as practised in secular fields are taught by the laity using mindfulness as a tool for therapy and to enhance well-being.

Nagarjuna mentioned two levels of truth, the conventional (mundane) truth and universal (spiritual) truth. As such, mindfulness can be practised at two levels - mundane and spiritual.

Although mindfulness is practised at the mundane level, one needs to be cautious of not taking mindfulness out of the whole matrix of Buddhism. Within Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is not applied in isolation; it is supported by, and supports, the development of wisdom and ethics.

Olednzki has rightly pointed out that just as a tree when removed from the forest is no longer a tree but a piece of timber, the caring attentiveness of mindfulness, when extracted from its matrix of wholesome co-arising factor, degenerates into mere attention (Andrew Olednzki in <http://clearviewblog.org/2011/08/>).

Certain Buddhist meditation masters have stressed that to conflate mindfulness with simple awareness, without judgement, is to miss other essential dimensions of mindfulness articulated in the Buddhist meditation texts and manuals (Analayo 2003, Brahm 2006).

Some psychologists also caution that attempts to separate mindfulness from the whole matrix of Buddhism, may give rise to the risk of losing the skill, knowledge and conceptual framework which Buddhism offers and separating mindfulness from its spiritual connection could be diluting its psychological effectiveness (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003).

Conclusion

In summary, mindfulness, as it is understood and practised in Buddhism, is a richer concept than thus far understood and applied in secular fields. It is essential for the practitioner to have an understanding of Buddhist principles and to practise mindfulness with ethics and wisdom. In the practice of right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), *sammā* means wholesome and *sati* cannot exist without wholesomeness.

Venerable Fa Xun holds academic qualifications in Business Studies, linguistics and Asian studies and served in the Sagaramudra Buddhist Society for 5 years. She has also taught Buddhism

in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia and is currently pursuing her MA (Applied Buddhist Studies) in Australia.

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8 | POJ Extra (POJ 43)

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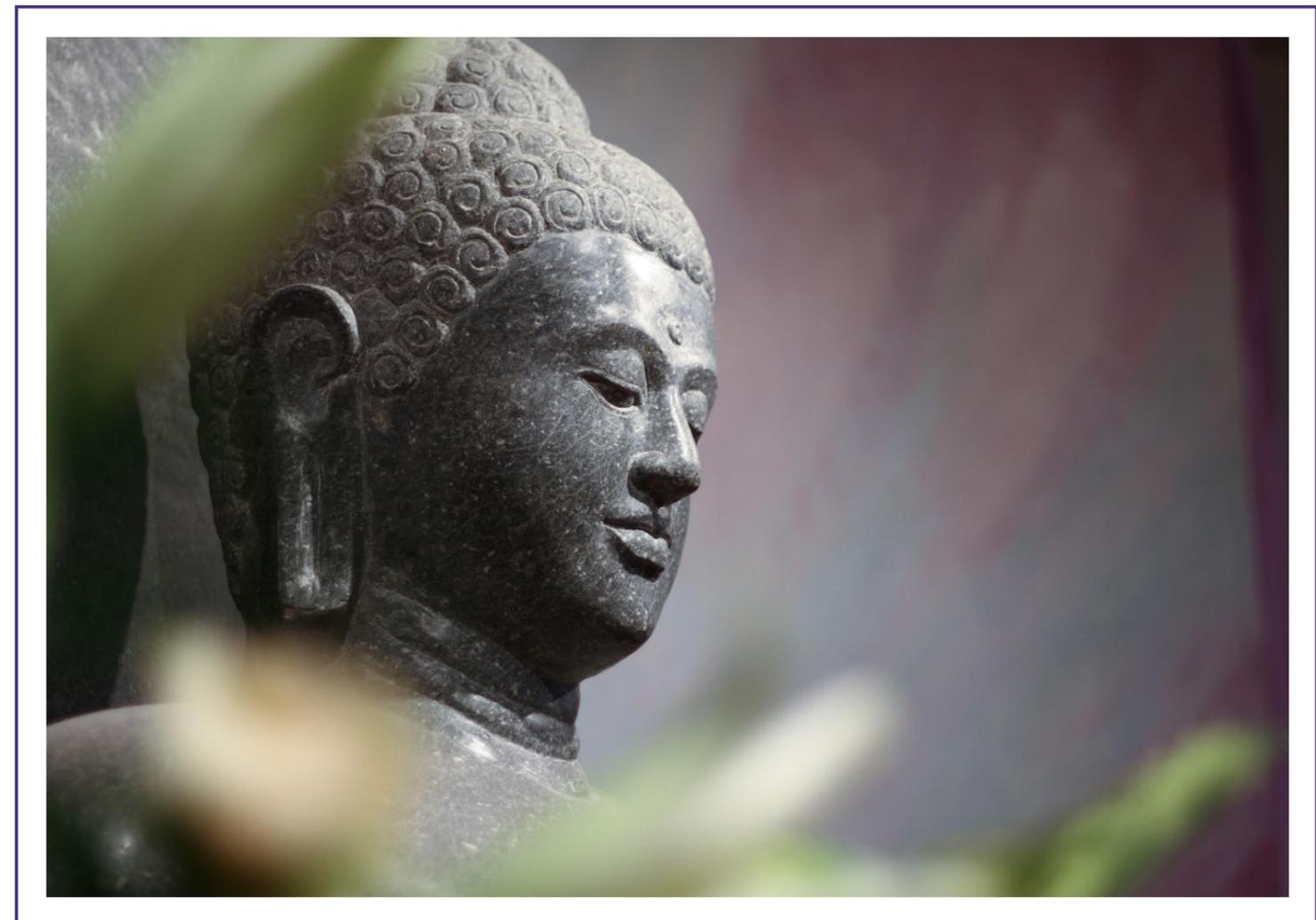


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POJ Extra (POJ 43) | 9