

Philosophies of Happiness

Chapter 9 Mindfulness, East and West: Supplementary Notes

3. In the introduction to another translation, Rhys Davids writes:

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. Rhys Davis, 1910, online unpaginated version. Cited by Bikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 12, No. 1, May 2011: 19-39, at 23.

In another context, Rhys Davids compares *sati* to Christian spirituality, suggesting that in Buddhism one is being called always to remember not the deity, but the “system of natural law” or ethics. Rhys Davids 1910, 323), cited by Gethin, 265. Thanissaro Bikkhu, a Western born, Thai trained Buddhist scholar speculates that Rhys Davids’ choice to translate the Pali word may have been influenced by an Anglican prayer to be ever mindful of the needs of others.

<http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/mindfulnessdefined.html>

4. Another version of the four establishments of mindfulness reads as follows:

And what, monks, is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and alertness [clearly comprehending], one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of mindfulness. *Suttanipāṭa* V 197 (*Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Bikkhu Bodhi (2000), 1671). Cited by Bikkhu Bodhi, 20.

5. Mendis and Horner render the second (*virīya*) as “energy.” Mendis, N.K. G, and I.B. Horner, *The questions of King Milinda: an abridgement of the Milindapañha.*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1993. Thanissaro Bikkhu renders the five as conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn48/sn48.010.than.html>

7. Sayādaw U Panditabhivamsa suggests that while the root *sati* derives from the root meaning “to remember,” as a mental faculty it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, awareness, wakefulness, and heedfulness, *rather than the faculty of memory of the past*. However, we should note that he is the successor of Mahāsī Sayādaw, and this is precisely the tradition that seems to have influenced the Western tradition of mindfulness meditation, which conceives of mindfulness as present-centered, non-judgmental awareness. Sayādaw U Panditabhivamsa *The Meaning of Satipatthāna* www.saddhamma.org/pdfs/the-meaning-of-satipatthana (2000).

11. Georges Dreyfus has outlined these stages lucidly. For the *Abhidharma*, attention starts at an early stage with *orienting* (*manasikāra*, often translated as attention, bringing to mind, or paying attention). This is the automatic ability of the mind to turn toward an object of awareness and select it. For the *Abhidharma*, every mental state that is conscious has some focus on an object. The next stages in the process of attention are mindfulness (*smṛti/sati*) and concentration (*samādhi/samatha*). In the view of Dreyfus, mindfulness proper is the retention of information so that the mind does not lose its object of focus. While orienting (*manasikāra*) turns the mind toward the object, mindfulness (*sati*) ensures that we do not lose it.

Next, concentration (*samādhi*) is the ability of the mind to *remain* unified and focused on its object. Finally, there develops clear comprehension (*samprajñāna/sampajañña*), a form of discrimination (*prajñā, paññā*) closely connected to mindfulness that allows the mind to observe, comprehend, and evaluate. Dreyfus describes this as a wise attention or wise mindfulness, to be distinguished from what he terms mindfulness proper, the more basic ability of mind to retain its object. He thus suggests that “mindfulness proper is the cognitive basis of the more explicitly cognitive wise mindfulness, which is central to the practice of mindfulness as understood by the Buddhist tradition.” He describes wise mindfulness as the ability to monitor our attention, to detect when our mind has wandered and bring it back to the object of focus. Dreyfus, “Is Mindfulness Present Centered and Non-Judgmental?” 48-50.

Jake Davis and Evan Thompson concur with Dreyfus that the understanding of *sati* as retentive focus renders it close to the notion of working memory. Jake Davis and Evan Thompson, “Developing Attention and Decreasing Affective Bias: Toward a Cross-Cultural Cognitive Science of Mindfulness,” *evanthompsondotme.files.wordpress.com*, 8.

12. Dreyfus and Thompson add that “concentration (*samādhi*) differs from attention in that it involves the ability of the mind not just to attend to an object but also to sustain this attention over a period of time. Similarly, mindfulness is more than the simple attending to the object. It involves the capacity of the mind to hold the object in its focus, preventing it from slipping away in forgetfulness . . . both factors . . . are present only when the object is apprehended with some degree of clarity and sustained focus.” Dreyfus and Thompson, 100.

13. Bikhu Boddhi, a contemporary commentator, suggests that there is a bridge between *sati* as lucid presence and as memory. *Sati* makes an object present and distinct in one’s mind. If the object appeared in the past, *sati* makes the object vivid in memory. When the object is a bodily process such as breathing or walking, the vivid presentation is a lucid awareness of the present. One can even have lucid awareness of something conceptual, such as the Buddha, the repulsiveness of the body, or even lovingkindness (*mettā*). Bikkhu Boddhi, 25-26.

14. Ven. Anāyalo likewise notes that in classical mindfulness meditation (*satipaṭṭhāna*) memory is not concerned with recalling past events, but awareness of the present moment. He writes that “in these meditations, it is due to the presence of *sati* that one is able to remember what is all too easily forgotten: the present moment. . . . mindfulness, being present (*upaṭṭitasati*), implies presence of mind, in so far as it directly opposed to absent mindedness (*mutṭhassati*); presence of mind in the sense that endowed with *sati*, one is wide awake in regard to the present moment. Owing to presence of mind, whatever one does or says will be clearly apprehended by the mind, and thus can be more easily remembered later on. Ven. Anāyalo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*. (Birmingham: Windhorse, 2003), 48.

21. Jon Kabat-Zinn has developed a program known as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). In MBSR, the term mindfulness is used for the meta-awareness that surveys the mind to see whether it has retained or lost focus on the object. The term awareness, in contrast, is used to represent the mind’s attention or focus. This is the reverse of the way the terms are used in popular works on Tibetan Buddhist meditation, in which mindfulness refers to focus or attention (the *samatha* practice that aims at stability of focus) and awareness to the meta-awareness that surveys the mind and its relation to the object of focus (*samprajñāna*) Thus some Buddhist monks will deny that they are aiming at mindfulness (focus), although their goal is similar to the practitioners of MBSR who are aiming at meta-awareness (but calling that mindfulness!) This confusion is in part related to a confusion in the classical terminology itself. We mentioned that *samatha* meditation aims to develop the faculty of *smṛti*, remembering or focus. But some *samatha* meditations use the practice of focus to develop meta-awareness (*samprajñāna*) at a later stage. See Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson, 509-510.

22. The term *satipaṭṭhāna* has rich nuances. Anayalo explains the etymology as follows. The term *satipaṭṭhāna* is a compound of *sati*, mindfulness and *upatthana*. The Pali term *upatthana* means placing near, and in this context refers to a particular way of being present and attending to something with mindfulness. In the early Buddhist discourses, the verb *upatthahati* often has nuances of being present or attending. *Satipaṭṭhāna* can thus be translated as attending with mindfulness. Rhys Davids thus speaks of the four presences of mindfulness.

The commentaries, however, derive *satipaṭṭhāna* from the word “foundation” or “cause” (*paṭṭhāna*). Anayalo points out this is unlikely, since in the discourses in the Pāli canon the corresponding verb *paṭṭhahati* never occurs with *sati*. Moreover, the noun *paṭṭhāna* is not found in the early discourses, but comes into use only in the historically later *Abhidhamma* and commentaries. In contrast, the discourses frequently relate *sati* to the verb *upatthahati*. This suggests that presence (*paṭṭhāna*) is the etymologically correct derivation. Anayalo, 29-30; Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and its Development in Buddhism* (Delhi: Oriental Books, 1978), 256.

Rupert Getthin agrees that *paṭṭhāna* is the correct derivation, and seeks to capture many of the rich nuances of the term. He suggests that the verb *upaṭiṣṭhāti* means primarily to stand near, and hence to be present, to manifest, and to serve. A regular expression in the early Buddhist discourses means causing mindfulness to stand near, to be present, or to come into service. Thus *sati* is a quality of mind that stands near, serves, or watches over the mind; it is a form of “presence of mind.” In the process of watching the body, feelings, mind and constituents of existence (*dhammas*), *sati* stands near, manifests and is established. The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are then four *anupassanās*, four activities the purpose of which is to bring *sati* into service. *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation thus consists of four practices of watching or contemplation that are four causes for the standing near of mindfulness, or four ways of manifesting mindfulness. Getthin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: One World, 2001), 32.

25. In responding to critiques, Kabat-Zinn notes that he had described meditation through an operational definition, one that would identify specific observable events or conditions such that other researchers can independently test or measure them. His early operational description of meditations focused on self-regulation of attention, and pointed out the benefit of cultivating “the wise, discerning, embodied, and selfless aspects of awareness itself.” His intention was not to de-contextualize Buddhist teachings, but rather to re-contextualize them in ways that would be useful to people who would not necessarily be open to the full language and teachings of Buddhism. He chose the term stress reduction because of its relation to the Buddhist truth of *dukkha* (suffering) as well as to clinical evidence of its importance to health and well being.

Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that he is using the term mindfulness as an umbrella term, “a place holder for the entire *dharma*,” not to erase real differences, but “as a potentially skillful means” of bringing together Buddhist teachings and clinical practice. His goal in the early years was to offer provisional, operational definitions, not to offer a definitive and concise definition of mindfulness in accord with the *Abhidharma* or any particular classical teaching. Thus he offered several working definitions, such as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” His early approach was to intentionally ignore or gloss over some potentially important nuances, that he felt could be worked out later by those with expertise in these areas.

Many of his critics pointed out that classical mindfulness teachings emphasize memory, the etymological root of *sati*, rather than simple awareness of the present moment. He responds that a natural function of present moment awareness is to remember the immediate past. Thus he did not think it necessary to feature the element of retentive memory in his operational definition, given how little Westerners tend to experience the present moment without the filter of our likes and dislikes. Thus the operational definition emphasizes non-judgmental awareness as a corrective to the cognitive habits of the contemporary Western mind.

Kabat-Zinn notes, too—in a quiet response to some of the scholarly critiques—that mindfulness practice is not merely a matter of the intellect, cognition, or scholarship, but of direct personal experience, and guided by an experienced and empathetic teacher. The approach of MBSR is not on fixing and curing, but healing, which he identifies with the capacity and willingness to experience with full awareness things just as they are.

We thus see in Kabat-Zinn’s conceptualization of mindfulness several themes we have seen throughout this study—the centrality of non-intentional doing and the basic joy of full, non-judgmental awareness. While Dreyfus emphasizes he is not trying to play a scholarly “gotcha” game, Kabat-Zinn responds that his goal in developing MBSR was not one of historical, scholarly precision; he developed provisional definitions of mindfulness that could be fully articulated and worked out later by scholars in the field. Rather, he has consciously selected from the tradition those aspects of the Buddhist teachings he felt were most needed in a clinical, therapeutic setting at this time and place in the West. We can note that to some extent, every teacher and age has done a similar job of selecting what was most valuable for the particular time and place in which they are teaching. Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections,” 288; idem, *Full Catastrophe Living* (New York: Dell, 1990); 163; citing David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1980), 19-26.

29. Commentators have noted problematic features of using the term “attention,” to characterize *sati*, for “attention” is used as a translation of another Buddhist technical term (*manasikāra*), whose function is to orient or turn the mind to an object. This is a spontaneous, automatic function. Thus, by explaining *sati*, even in its initial stage, as bare attention, Nyanaponika fused its meaning with that of *manasikāra*. Bikkhu Bodhi, 29; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Power of Mindfulness* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1968). http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/powermindfulness.pdf, 2 ff.

32. Anāyalo writes that “this basic faculty of ordinary attention (*manasikāra*) characterizes the initial split seconds of bare cognizing of an object, before one begins to recognize, identify, and conceptualize. *Sati* can be understood as a further development and temporal extension of this type of attention, which adds clarity and depth to the usually much too short fraction of time occupied by bare attention in the perceptual process. In the precise use of technical terminology, *manasikāra* is something that takes place at the initial state of a cognitive process, whereas *sati* belongs to a later stage, bringing sustained attention on the object and rendering its appearance vivid to cognition.

What would have motivated Nyanaponika to use the term attention? In his earliest works, written in German, he had translated *sati* as *achtsamkeit*, which means attentiveness, heedfulness, mindfulness, care. Thus Bikkhu Bodhi, himself a close disciple of Nyanaponika, expresses concern with his terminology: while mindfulness might be synonymous with *attentiveness*, in the sense of *sustained attention*, when it is explained as bare attention, this risks conflating deliberate mindfulness (*sati*) with the automatic act of noticing (*manasikāra*). It might be that this is what happened in the case of Ven. Henepola Gunaratana, who in his popular manual *Mindfulness in Plain English* (often quoted on the Internet) identified mindfulness with the initial non-conceptual awareness that precedes concepts and discursive thought. Cited by Bikkhu Bodhi, 27-28.

33. At the same time, Bikkhu Bodhi acknowledges that in the foundational *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* text, there is support for the notion that the initial purpose of *sati* is bare registering of facts, as free as possible from distorting concepts, such as I and mine. *Sati* can help keep distortions in check, even while it is only wisdom (*paññā*) that can totally eliminate the cognitive distortions. The lucid awareness and focus of *sati* can show us objects plainly, without misleading elaborations. Bodhi, 32.

Likewise, Ven. Anāyalo brings images of *sati* from the classic Pali discourses—such as climbing an elevated platform or a tower—that point to connotations of relaxed, aloof, uninvolved detachment that

characterizes *sati*; these allow the meditator to observe one's mental states without the usual distortions. Although bare attention is just the first stage of *sati*, he notes that "this bare attention aspect of *sati* has an intriguing potential, since it is capable of leading to a deautomatization of mental mechanisms. Through bare *sati* one is able to see things just as they are, unadulterated by habitual reactions and projections. By bringing the perceptual process into the full light of awareness, one becomes conscious of automatic and habitual responses to perceptual data. Full awareness of these automatic responses is the necessary preliminary step to changing detrimental mental habits." Anāyalo, 60 On deautomatization, see Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," in *Psychiatry* 29:4 (November, 1966): 324-28, at 329 and other citations in Anāyalo 60, note 70. In another context, Anāyalo comments that this detached but receptive stance of *satipaṭṭhāna* constitutes a middle path between suppression and reaction. We can see that Ven. Anāyalo, a German born monk, who was ordained and received a PhD on *satipaṭṭhāna* in Sri Lanka, makes comfortable bridges to Western psychology, even while careful to ground himself firmly in the Pāli sources. He writes: "The receptivity of *sati*, without suppression or reaction, allows personal shortcoming and unjustified reactions to unfold before the watchful stance of the meditator, without being suppressed by the affective investment inherent in one's self image. Maintaining the presence of *sati* in this way is closely related to the ability to tolerate a high degree of cognitive dissonance, since the witnessing of one's own shortcomings ordinarily leads to unconscious attempts at reducing the resulting feeling of discomfort by avoiding or even altering the perceived information. This shift towards a more objective and uninvolved perspective introduces an important element of sobriety into self-observation. Anāyalo, 58-59.

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46. David McMahan in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, has suggested that the emphasis on positive valuation of the present moment is a peculiarly modernist construction. The appreciation of each moment of everyday life is central to the descriptions of mindfulness by popular meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Likewise, McMahan notes an almost sensuous appreciation of this world in descriptions of mindfulness by the contemporary teacher Lama Suray Das (Jeffery Miller), and a similar heightened appreciation of present sensations in descriptions by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield. (216). He describes this appreciation of present reality as a modernist response to the desacralization and disenchantment of reality. McMahan is here drawing upon Charles Taylor's description of two new views that arose during the Protestant Reformation: affirmation of the value of ordinary life, and the notion that sacredness and dignity can be found not in an afterlife but in this life. Romantic and Modernist authors and poets reflect a similar emphasis on the mystery and value of the present moment of experience. (218-221). McMahan notes critiques by Thanissaro Bikkhu of a Romantic strain of Buddhism in contemporary discourse. Thanissaro Bikkhu stresses that in classical sources, mindfulness was not practiced for the purpose of appreciation of this world, but for seeing the impermanence of all things (McMahan, 248; Thanissaro Bikkhu, “Romancing the Buddha? *Tricycle* 12: 45-47, 106-11, at 108-111). However, McMahan notes that the devaluing of this world of *samsara* and monastic asceticism was revised to a certain extent by Mahayana Buddhism, which stresses the identity of *samsara* and *nirvana*, and the Bodhisattva's work of compassion in this world. Thus Mahayana and Zen discourse is not as far from contemporary emphasis on the value of this world that we find in current mindfulness meditation. (234) The appreciation of the value of this world is especially heightened in Zen; McMahan cites Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen, for his appreciation of the beauty of this world's mountains and rivers (McMahan, 161-2). See above, Chapter 10). Nevertheless, he does not find evidence in traditional texts for the use of mindfulness to appreciate the moment and do one's work with skillful ease.

We find an interesting parallel to traditional vs. modernist constructions of mindfulness in a debate between Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem over the valuing of this world in the eighteenth century Hasidism. This pietist movement was influenced by the Kabbalistic teaching that sparks of holiness have been trapped in the lower, material world and are awaiting return to their heavenly source. Buber drew parallels between Zen and Hasidic tales, and construed Hasidim as appreciating the value of discovering God through communing with the everyday aspects of this world. However, Gershom Scholem responded that Buber's Romantic vision of Hasidism does not square with historical Hasidism. Traditional Hasidic texts are not concerned with the appreciation of this worldly pleasure, but freeing the sparks of holiness from an inferior, unredeemed world. Similarly, early Buddhist texts taught mindfulness of mental processes in order to see their insubstantiality, not to appreciate their beauty and wonder. See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, 228-40 and Buber's response, Martin Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” *Commentary* 36 (September 1963): 218-223, in which Buber writes that his goal

was not to reflect the history of Hasidism but to “recapture a sense of the power that once gave it the capacity to take hold of and vitalize the life of diverse classes of people. 218. See Rachel White, “Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: the Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Volume 14: 364-392, 364 note 4 for bibliography on the vast literature on this controversy.

57. For example, when we exert our bodies, the sensation of the sixth sense of proprioception may become dominant. In that moment, awareness is filled with somatic input, without language or conceptualization. If we immerse ourselves in the sensation of a sight we can become lost in the visual beauty and may not realize the concept behind what we are seeing. On the other hand, we can also conceptualize what we see; we can give it a name and compare what we see now with what we have seen before. Thus we may have difficulty seeing the tree as it is; we may be trying to connect the word “tree,” a linguistic representation, with the actual visual image. This removes us from direct sensation of the first five senses. We can be aware of the thought, but this feels different from sensing the tree. When we think about the tree, concepts dominate the streams flowing into our awareness, and the tree becomes more a category than a sensation. The key to mindful awareness is to balance these streams of awareness (Siegel 76). The description offered by Siegel is parallel to descriptions of the mind’s functioning in classical Buddhist texts (See Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 135-6; Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 20-23).

Like Zhuangzi, Siegel has proposed a wheel or circle of awareness as a visual metaphor for the functioning of the mind; he also invites neuropsychologists to consider its possible neural correlates (Siegel, 121). On the outer rim of the wheel of awareness lies anything that can enter the focus of our attention. Each point on the rim represents a potential object of awareness, from a physical sensation in one’s body, to a thought, memory, or emotion. The spokes emanating from the central hub symbolize our ability to focus attention on a single point on the rim. We can send a feeler out to the rim and pick up information from it, like Zhuangzi’s sage pivoted at the center of the Dao, responding with flexible awareness to any point on the rim that arises. In Siegel’s model, one is sending forth a kind of sensor to discover what is out there to become aware of. The hub at the center of the wheel of awareness symbolizes the spaciousness of the mind, which can engage a particular point on the rim or be receptive to whatever arises along the rim as it enters the hub or center. We can choose to focus on a particular aspect of experience or simply be open and receptive to experiences that come our way.

60. These final observations may resolve a conflict we might perceive between Siegel’s somewhat negative perspective on the process of observation and the positive emphasis on observation we find in many descriptions of mindfulness. Siegel describes the capacity for observation as a distancing function that inhibits the direct immersion in experience. In contrast, mindfulness research includes as a key mindfulness tool the capacity for mental distance and observation, the ability to observe experience without judgment. We have seen in our discussion of attentive awareness in the Confucian context that there may be two ways to experience the world mindfully. One way is to access an internal witness that simply observes and does not judge. Another way is to be fully immersed in the flow of experience, so that one loses the sense of a separate witness and becomes one with the experience. These may provide two complementary approaches to mindful awareness.