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‘Paying Attention’ in a Digital Economy: Reflections on the Role of Analysis and Judgement Within Contemporary Discourses of Mindfulness and Comparisons with Classical Buddhist Accounts of *Sati*

Richard King

Introduction

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, building upon the development of reformist-oriented Buddhist modernisms in the previous century (McMahan 2008), Asian philosophies and meditative practices have increasingly been adopted as means of reducing stress and adjusting to life in a fast-paced world of a globalizing and capitalist economy. This can be seen in the extraordinary popularity and spread of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) techniques, itself drawing directly upon the revivalist *vipassana*-only movement of Burma’s Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), within Western health-care systems, corporate ‘stress-relief’ management classes and even within the USA and Korean military. That there are considerable disparities between the techniques and aims of these practices (and their emphasis upon immediate stress-relief) and traditional Buddhist meditational teachings and practices, which seek to intensify one’s awareness of *dukkha*, is a subject requiring rigorous and critical attention by scholars of Buddhism.

What is *new* about modern discourses of mindfulness and how might they relate or not to the ancient Buddhist discourses about mental training/development (*bhāvanā*) to which they often appeal? How does an ancient set of practices designed to cultivate a spiritual awareness of radical impermanence (*anitya*) and existential strife (*dukkha*) become a globally accepted secular technique for stress reduction and well-being? What issues are involved when a set of ancient meditative practices, designed to achieve a state of liberation (*nirvāṇa*) from rebirth and embedded in Buddhist monastic rituals, institutional practices and an ethic of non-violence, are transformed into a modern, secularized therapeutic intervention widely adopted in Western health-care systems, corporate boardrooms and military training regimes?

Mindfulness and Attention

A history of mindfulness is simultaneously a history of attention. According to the late nineteenth-century French psychologist Théodule Ribot, attention can be characterized as ‘progress towards unity of consciousness’. In this regard, Ribot argues attention ‘is an exceptional, abnormal state, which cannot last a long time, for

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the reason that it is in contradiction to the basic condition of psychic life; namely, change'.¹

Using Ribot's designation we can go some-way to understand what classical Buddhist literature means by *sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*), the Pali word now almost universally translated into English as 'mindfulness'. Attention involves the adverting of consciousness towards an object of experience but to 'hold one's attention' upon that object also requires a certain 'unity of consciousness'. In classical Buddhist accounts of mental training (*bhāvanā*), overcoming the oscillating nature of consciousness and achieving mental equipoise are associated with techniques designed to facilitate concentration (*samādhi*) and calm (*samatha*). The standard account that emerged within the Buddhist literature tended to emphasize the conjoining of techniques designed to facilitate awareness and attention (*vipassanā*) and those which facilitated an ever greater unity of consciousness (*samādhi*), although it is likely that the precise balance between these two varied in different circumstances, traditions and individual practices (Cousins 1973).

Although classical Buddhist literature might agree with some of Ribot's characterization of attention, it would not necessarily agree with his description of it as an 'abnormal' state of mind. Arguably, the Buddhist—and generally yogic—diagnosis of our mental condition is that the so-called everyday, distracted (*vikṣepa*) states of mind are themselves the aberration or problem to be overcome. However, most of our everyday experience is indeed a history of repeated distraction (what the Buddhists describe as our 'monkey mind'). Similarly, Ribot's account implies that attention is a fleeting matter undermined by the fluctuating nature of experience. For Buddhists, focused attention leads to a much greater awareness of the fact of change, but in advanced practitioners, this is not seen as preventing the cultivation of attention as a stabilizing mode of continued awareness. Indeed, prolonged attention is seen, in many Buddhist

accounts as a much greater awareness of that flux.

Nevertheless, it is clear that as the Buddhist tradition developed two different characterizations of consciousness emerged: one focused on the reality of impermanence, and the Buddhist emphasis on no-abiding-self (*anātman*) emphasized the processual nature of consciousness. The path of mental training involves disciplining the mind to avoid distraction and to remain present to one's experience of the radical impermanence of reality. However, another strand of thought is also present in the early Buddhist literature which resonated more strongly with the prevailing 'yogic' philosophical opinion in India. This second strand postulated an innate unity and purity of consciousness and saw the achievement of mental equipoise and calmness as a return of consciousness to its natural state—like a pond once the ripples of a pebble have dispersed or the ocean below the waves. On this view, our prevailing everyday experience of dispersed and distracted states of mind constituted the stirring up or 'whirring' of consciousness (*citta-vṛtti*) from its natural state and was indicative of life in the samsāric realm for those not yet awakened and liberated from the cycle of rebirths. This notion of an underlying unity of consciousness behind our changing states of mind was the model that predominated in the Brahmanical yogic traditions associated with Sāṃkhya, Yoga and the *Upaniṣads* (Vedānta) where it was associated with a non-agential and pure 'witness consciousness' (*sākṣin*) standing 'behind' the changing flow of experiences. Although the dominant conception of consciousness in Buddhist philosophical thought in India however remained the processual model, as outlined in the Abhidharma literature, the 'innate purity' model continued to find vehicles for expression, most overtly in the 'Buddha nature' (*tathāgatagarbha*) strand of the Mahāyana (emerging in the fourth/fifth century CE) and in subsequent debates about the sudden or gradual nature of enlightenment.²

¹Ribot (1898: 2).

²For further discussion of this see Faure 1991; Sharf 2014a, b.

'Meditation' and the Role of Intellectual Analysis

The Buddhist tradition has long had a specific association with what we have come to call in the West 'meditation'. Use of this English word carries an ambiguity within it since it is often used to denote a set of specific practices linked to pacifying the analytic processes of the mind and achieving a state of concentrated calmness, practices that, in the Buddhist tradition, are associated with the *jhānas* (Sanskrit; *dhyāna*) and the cultivation of concentration and calm (*samādhi/samatha*). However, the English word meditate is also used as a synonym of the exercise of sustained mental reflection upon something as in 'I shall meditate on that question and get back to you'. In a Buddhist context, the exercise of reflective cognition is associated with the cultivation of insight (Pali: *vipassanā*; Sanskrit: *vipaśyanā*) and wisdom or 'analytical insight' (*paññā/prajñā*). The potential elision between this second aspect of 'mental training' (*bhāvanā*, what we now routinely translate into English as 'meditation') and the general application of analytic reasoning/mental reflection produced a similar ambiguity within Buddhist circles, akin to the two senses of 'meditation' in an Anglophone context. Although, as we shall see, the mainstream Abhidharmic account of Buddhist mental training presupposes a significant role for mental ratiocination and cognition, alternative views which characterize awakening (*bodhi*) as the quiescence of all mental activity continue to be expressed, especially in those strands of Buddhist thought which came to adopt a non-dualistic worldview (such as some forms of Ch'an/Zen (Sharf 2014a, b) and Tibetan *dzogchen* practice).³

The thorny question of the relationship of an intellectual analysis of the nature of reality and the systematic practice of disciplining and calming the mind is encapsulated by the combination of *sammā-sati* and *sammā-samādhi* as twin components of standard Buddhist accounts of the

nature of mental development and training. As La Vallée Poussin first noted, a concrete instance of the tension between 'understanding the Dhamma' and disciplining the mind can be found in the example of two of the Buddha's disciples Musīla and Nārada (La Vallée Poussin 1937). Musīla is said to have acquired a detailed understanding of the teachings of the Buddha based upon mental comprehension and analysis but has not 'touched nirvāṇa with the body', that is not achieved a direct *experiential* realization of it.

Friend, though I have clearly seen as it really is with correct wisdom, 'Nibbāna is the cessation of existence,' I am not an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed. Suppose, friend, there was a well along a desert road, but it has neither a rope nor a bucket. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired parched, and thirsty. He would look down into the well and the knowledge would occur to him, 'There is water,' but he would not be able to make bodily contact with it (*na ca kāyena phusitvā vihareyya*). So too, friend, though I have clearly seen as it really is with correct wisdom, 'Nibbāna is the cessation of existence,' I am not an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed.⁴

Similarly, *Anguttara Nikāya* VI, 46 records discord within the community of the Buddha's disciples in the form of a distinction between the *jhāyīn* (one who practices the *jhānas*) and the *dhammayogins* who are said to have an intellectual grasp of the teachings based upon the application of analytical insight (*prajñā*).

Friends, there are monks who are keen on Dhamma (*dhammayogin*) and they disparage those monks who are meditators (*jhāyīn*), saying: 'Look at those monks! They think, "We are meditating, we are meditating!" And so they meditate to and meditate fro, meditate up and meditate down. What, then, do they meditate about and why do they meditate?' Thereby neither these monks keen on Dhamma nor the meditators will be pleased, and they will not be practising for the welfare and happiness of the multitude, for the good of the multitude, for the welfare and happiness of *devas* and humans.⁵

³See Sharf (2014a, b) and Dunne (2013) for further discussion of this.

⁴*Kosambī Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya* II.68, translation in Bodhi (2000: 611).

⁵*Anguttara Nikāya* VI, 46, translation in Bodhi and Thera (1999: 163–164).

It is not immediately clear from this account if we are to take the *jhāyin* to denote a practitioner of techniques leading to the quiescence of ‘mental whirring’ (*citta-vṛtti*)⁶ associated with *samādhi* training or if this also includes the systematic cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*) and ‘mindfulness’ (*sati*). Thus, we cannot be absolutely certain whether the term *dhammayogin* denotes a ‘purely intellectual’ and scholarly appreciation of the *Dhamma* or it relates to a conception of meditative practice that emphasizes the continued application (and even *enhancement*) of mental cognition, analytic reasoning through the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*).

The discord recorded between these two groups perhaps reflects early ambiguities and tensions about the role of and relationship between ‘insight-based’ and ‘concentration-based’ techniques in the Pali Buddhist literature but may also reflect a difference of opinion over the role and importance of mental ratiocination in the achievement of liberation. As the traditional story of the Buddha’s life coalesced, probably over many centuries, the standard resolution of this tension was to assign the practice of advanced stages of concentration, such as the achievement of the sphere of nothingness (*ākāṅkṣānāyatana*) and the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*), to the training undertaken by Gotama under the guidance of Āḷara Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta prior to his full awakening (see Wynne 2007). The problem with following these methods alone, it came to be argued, is that while they pacify the thirst-driven motivational impulses to a significant extent and also train the aspirant in achieving a one-pointed (*ekāgatta*) state of mind, without the cultivation of insight and the development of a full existential appreciation of the four noble truths

(and three marks of existence), they do not lead to final awakening (*bodhi*).

A similar tension, I wish to argue, plays out in a new form and context in contemporary discourses about ‘mindfulness’ in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As ‘mindfulness-based’ practices become adapted and applied in non-Buddhist and ‘secular’ contexts, the dominant discourse has tended to characterize ‘mindfulness’ as a present-centred and non-judgemental awareness, seeking to curtail to a significant degree our usual processes of mental ratiocination and cultivating an attitude of calm acceptance and ‘bare attention’ free from analysis and judgement. Thus, as Jon Kabat-Zinn describes it, mindfulness is about ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally’.⁷ However, while this is perhaps the dominant characterization of mindfulness, it is by no means the only model of mindfulness in operation.

Many contemporary Buddhist accounts of mindfulness, drawing upon the Abhidharmic model, assert quite forcefully the role of cognition and ethical judgement in the context of mindfulness practice. This is most strikingly clear in accounts offered by proponents of what has come to be known as Engaged Buddhism. As we shall see, the traditional Abhidharmic emphasis upon analysing the causal conditions which produce suffering (*duḥkha*) and the clear role of ethical reflections and judgements upon one’s experience in seeking to cultivate harmonious states of mind (*kuśala*) are emphasized and in fact quite radically extended in some engaged Buddhist accounts transforming mindfulness into a form of direct political ‘consciousness-raising’ in relation to the embedded structures of social and economic injustice that inform our everyday experience of the world. The distinction between these two characterizations of mindfulness, I shall argue, constitutes a still-emerging theoretical fault line

⁶I use this phrase because it resonates more generally with the trend in yogic philosophical circles to focus on techniques for pacifying mental vacillation in advanced states of concentration (*samādhi*). Note for instance how in the *Ur-text* of the Hindu Brahmanical yoga school, Patañjali defines yoga precisely as the ‘cessation of mental whirring’ (*cittavṛttinirodhāḥ*, YS1.2).

⁷Kabat-Zinn (1994), 4 For some insightful discussion of the modern emphasis on ‘being in the moment non-judgementally’: see Bodhi (2013: 27f) and also Dreyfus and Orendski.

within contemporary discourses of mindfulness and is thrown into relief by the rapidly changing context of early twenty-first-century life.

I will briefly discuss three factors of contemporary life that have precipitated this fault line in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They are as follows: the global spread of neoliberal forms of capitalism, growing concerns about climate change and social and economic disparities of wealth, and the impact of new digital technologies on human consciousness. First, however, it is important to be clear about some of the philosophical assumptions underlying traditional Buddhist accounts of *sati*.

Mind and Mindfulness in Ancient Indian Buddhist Thought

We take the rendering 'mindfulness' so much for granted that we rarely inquire into the precise nuances of the English term, let alone the meaning of the original Pali word it represents and the adequacy of the former as a rendering for the latter. (Bodhi 2013: 22)

It is important to take a moment to look afresh at ancient Buddhist debates about techniques of mental development/training (*bhāvanā*) and resist their easy assimilation into a set of modern, Western assumptions and representations of what we now call 'Buddhist meditation'. This is especially important since Buddhist traditions have come to be associated in the West with a particular understanding of 'meditation', often conceived in terms of the 'pacification of the mind' because of the way that 'Buddhism' came to be associated with prevailing Orientalist stereotypes about 'the mystic East'. If "mysticism" is seen as the pre-eminently non-rational, then Buddhism, when viewed as a mystical tradition, comes to be framed in terms that reflect such cultural assumptions. As already noted, however, even in English the word 'meditation' carries an ambiguity—denoting either a pacification of the mind or a process of mental reflection. The association of 'Buddhism' with the former in the popular imagination has occluded the important role assigned to mental reflection and analysis in many traditional Buddhist accounts of the cultivation of *sati*.

Another way to illustrate this point is to consider the English phrase 'being philosophical'. There are two primary ways in which this phrase is used. Firstly, and probably more commonly, it denotes a form of relaxed detachment in the face of adversity, e.g. 'Her beloved piano fell down the stairs but she was philosophical about it'. There is a second use of the term however denoting a form of critical, intellectual reflection upon language and/or experience associated more specifically with the disciplined activity of philosophical analysis. Consider for instance the example of the sixth century BCE pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxamines. It is said that he once thought to blow on his hand in two ways: first with his mouth open and then with his lips pursed. When blowing with an open mouth, he experienced warmth, but with his lips pursed, his breath felt cold to his hand. Anaxamines then asked why this was so and in doing so sought to analyse his experience to understand the underlying cause of the change in sensations. Such examples as this have often been used to locate the origins of philosophy and even science as a whole in the thought experimentations of the pre-Socratics of ancient Greece.⁸ However, it strikes me that on some classical Buddhist readings of *sati*, there is a similar emphasis upon a stepping back and observation of experience *combined* with an analytical reflection upon its antecedent causes. From this perspective, *sati* is much more about cultivating a 'philosophical approach' to the world—in both senses of the modern use of that term—on the one hand as a form of suspended emotional detachment ('being philosophical') but also in the sense of offering a meta-analytic perspective upon experience—a mental cogitation on what is presented in perceptions, the exercise, if you like, of critical thinking or a philosophical analysis of experience.

Modern accounts of mindfulness of the Kabat-Zinn variety tend to ignore this second dimension of *sati*. Mindfulness becomes primarily about witnessing without reacting, 'being philosophical' in the first sense but certainly not in the second. As we will see, in classical

⁸See for instance, Vernon (2015).

Abhidharma and early Mahāyāna accounts, *sati* is usually represented as exemplifying both dimensions—fostering a degree of emotional detachment—a ‘standing back’ from reactive habitual forms (emphasized in Nyanaponika’s focus upon *sati* as a form of ‘bare attention’) but also by the disciplined exercise of analytical insight (*prajñā*) to that experience through an examination of its antecedent causes and conditions and an intention to direct consciousness towards ethically wholesome rather than unwholesome thoughts.

We must appreciate therefore that the political and cultural transformation involved in the translation of key terms and practices from their ancient Buddhist context and into a modern English conceptual frame, replete with its own cultural associations. As Talal Asad has noted:

To put it crudely, because the languages of third world societies ... are seen as weaker in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around.⁹

In this sense, one needs to revisit the standard translation of these terms in order to resist their easy assimilation to modern Anglophone assumptions about ‘mindfulness’, allowing them to retain a ‘discomforting—even scandalous—presence within the received language’ (Asad 1993: 199). To do this, we need to appreciate that there is an enormous complexity to ancient Buddhist philosophical discussions of consciousness and a rich vocabulary of technical terms encompassing what in an English language context would be called ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’. In the Indian traditions of Buddhist thought include Sanskrit terms such as *citta*, *manas* and *viññāna* and cognate terms (such as *jñāna*, *prajñā*, *saṃjñā* and *dhyāna*) referring to different functions and modalities of awareness, representing affective, cognitive and conative dimensions of consciousness. Understanding these terms is crucial for an appreciation of the emergence and eventual consolidation of early

Buddhist accounts of the mental training (*bhāvanā*) required to achieve awakening (*bodhi*).

In the West, the material and the mental worlds have often been treated as two distinctive domains; however, in the ancient Indian context in which Buddhist notions of mental training first developed it is important to recognize the inadequacy of such dualisms. Although Buddhists texts frequently refer to ‘*nāma-rūpa*’ (name and form, often glossed in English as ‘mind’ and ‘body’), these are usually taken in unison as a compound form, reflecting a recognition of the ‘psychosomatic’ nature of human experience. It is also stated many times throughout the early Buddhist literature that mind or consciousness cannot arise without a material base and similarly that our experience of material objects is dependent upon the arising of a consciousness of them. Moreover, Indian Buddhist thought developed a complex array of terms to denote the different affective, cognitive and conative operations of consciousness.

Sensory awareness (*viññāna*) arises as a result of contact between the sense organs and their specific sense objects. There are six sensory realms in classical Buddhist thought, what have traditionally been known as the five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste), plus *mano-viññāna*—mental consciousness, which apprehends internal states of mind, ideas, etc. The mental function of apperception (*mano-viññāna*) came to be distinguished over time from *manas*—the mind as a centralizing and agential faculty that organizes the different arrays of sense data, thereby constructing a coherent mental picture out of these disparate sensory sources. Thus, it is quite common in an Indian Buddhist context to see *mano-viññāna* described as a ‘sixth sense’—an apprehender of ‘mental’ sensory data and for this to be clearly distinguished from the more analytical functions of consciousness (carried out by the *manas*). Thus, apart from a basic conscious awareness (*viññāna*) of a sensation (*vedanā*), Buddhist thought also acknowledges the role of mental cognition in the classification of sensory impressions (*saṃjñā*), as well as the affective response that arises in relation to those impressions (the various *saṃskāras*). These factors then induce the arousal of intention

⁹Asad (1993:190).

(*cetanā*, the conative aspect) in the individual, reflecting a goal-directed response to one's environment.

The Pali word for 'mindfulness', *Sati*, and its Sanskrit equivalent, *smṛti*, have a primary meaning of memory or recollection. In a Hindu Brahmanical context, *smṛti* denotes the 'remembered traditions' (such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*), to be distinguished from *śruti*—'that which is heard,' namely the direct revelation of the Vedas. In the context of training of the mind (*bhāvanā*), the early Buddhist usage retains some of this sense, but, rather than focusing upon 'historical memory', relates more to the idea of a mental state of sustained attention—an awareness that *remains* present to the complex, evanescent and causally produced operations of consciousness and its objects, or to use John Peacock's preferred translation: 'present moment recollection' (Peacock 2014: 6).¹⁰ Buddhaghosa (1950) characterizes *sati* as a form of 'remembering' (*saraṇa*) and says it is characterized by 'not wobbling' (*apilāpana*): 'Its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding, or it is manifested as the state of confronting an objective field' (*Visuddhimagga* XIV, 141).¹¹ As Gethin (2013: 264) notes, early English renditions of the term in its specifically Buddhist context include 'correct meditation' (for *sammā-sati*, Gogerley 1845); 'the faculty that reasons on moral subjects, the conscience' (Hardy 1850); and the 'ascertainment of truth by mental application' (Hardy 1853). It seems, however, that the first person to translate *sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*) as mindfulness was T. W. Rhys-Davids in 1910. He remarks:

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 have 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.¹²

It is clear that in classical Buddhist literature, *sati* involves an analytic awareness of the truth of the four noble truths leading to a deep appreciation of the impermanent, suffering and no-self marks of existence. This involves a clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) of causal relations (how things arise and cease), and part of the point in using a term like *sati* is to emphasize how this requires a 'memory of the present', a sustained attention to the present moment, including its causal history—that is, a recollection of past behavioural patterns and experiences that inform the present moment. In the Nikāya and Abhidharma discussions of *sati* then, such practice *requires* rather than suspends analytical reflection upon experience.¹³ Moreover, the practice of *sati* is taken to be a practice integrated within the wider aspects of the eightfold path and includes ethical reflection upon the wholesome and unwholesome *dhammas* that arise within the mind and an explicit aim of cultivating the former and uprooting the latter. It seems quite clear then that from the Abhidharmic point of view, *sati* involves sustained ethical reflection and analysis of the processes of causation that lead to the rise of *dhammas*. Thus, drawing upon traditional Abhidharmic accounts of *sati*, Dreyfus (2013: 47) argues that

Mindfulness then is not the present-centred non-judgemental awareness of an object but the paying close attention to an object, leading to the retention of the data so as to make sense of the information delivered by our cognitive apparatus. Thus, far from being limited to the present and to a mere refraining from passing judgement, mindfulness is a cognitive activity closely connected to memory, particularly to working memory, the ability to keep relevant information active so that it can be integrated within meaningful patterns and used for goal-directed activities.¹⁴

¹⁰Peacock (2014). Referring in particular to *Dhammasaṅghaṇi* 16, Gethin (2013: 270) notes the following early Abhidhamma terms associated with *sati*: recollection (*annasati*), recall (*paṭissati*) remembrance (*saraṇatā*), keeping in mind (*dhāraṇatā*), absence of floating (*apilāpanatā*) and an absence of forgetfulness (*asammussanatā*).

¹¹Translation in Ñāṇamoli (1975: 467).

¹²Rhys-Davids and Rhys-Davids (1910: 322).

¹³For a useful discussion of the role of mental cognition in Pali canonical Buddhist accounts of *sati* see Bodhi (2013)

¹⁴Dreyfus (2013)

The Centrality of *Prajñā* in Abhidharma and Early Mahāyāna Accounts

As a number of scholars have suggested (see for instance Gethin 2011; Cousins 1996), the singling out of ‘insight meditation’ as the distinctive element within Buddhist meditational practice does not seem to reflect a traditional Theravāda perspective which generally involves a conjunction of insight and concentration practices as symbiotic constituents of the eightfold path. Indeed, it is questionable whether one can speak accurately of ‘insight meditation’ in this way before the modern period. As Bhikkhu Anālayo notes:

[I]n the thought-world of the early discourses the term *vipassanā* stands predominantly for insight as a quality to be developed. This thus differs from the modern day usage, where *vipassanā* often stands representative for a particular form of meditation, usually a specific technique whose practice marks off one insight meditation tradition from another.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in the stress placed upon the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*paññā*) as a necessary component of the path to awakening, we see an important ideological marker of the distinctive contribution of the Buddha as a teacher when compared to the other yogically oriented movements of the India of his day. Indeed, in characteristically Indic fashion, concentration-inducing practices—and the prevailing hierarchical cosmologies associated with them—were incorporated into the Buddhist eightfold path (as *sammā samādhi*, ‘right concentration’) but characterized as singularly deficient unless symbiotically linked to the practice of *sammā sati* (‘right mindfulness’) and the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*).

Within Indian Buddhist literature, therefore, the cultivation of wisdom or ‘analytical insight’ (*paññā/prajñā*) came to be seen as a crucial marker of a distinctively Buddhist path of mental development (*bhāvanā*) when compared to prevailing yogic systems in India. The cultivation or exercise of *prajñā* thus came to be used in

Buddhist circles as an indicator of the superiority of Buddhist mental training (*bhāvanā*) when compared to other systems of yogic discipline which also utilized the language of concentration (*samādhi*) and the goal of the unification of consciousness through meditative equipoise. The claim that *prajñā* and the cultivation of insight were specific features of the Buddhist approach to mental training is of course not one that was accepted by these rival schools. Patañjali’s *Yoga-Sūtra* for instance sees the goal of yogic practice as the ‘cessation of mental fluctuations’ (*cittavṛttinirodhāh*, YS 1.2) but makes it abundantly clear that advanced forms of *samādhi* rather than being mere states of internalized concentration remain truth-bearing states that involve *prajñā* (YS I.48).¹⁶ In contrast, many Buddhist accounts speak of *samādhi* as a state of inward concentration leading to calm, but not necessarily to insight. One of the thorny issues here is recognizing how different yogic literary traditions deploy the same technical terms (such as *samādhi* and *prajñā*) but with quite different implications.

It is worth dwelling briefly then upon the role and place of *prajñā* in the practice of ‘mindfulness’ (*smṛti/sati*). One of the challenges here is that because *prajñā* came to be seen as an indispensable component of an awakened mind, the term took on a level of significance within the Buddhist tradition which meant that while it could never be repudiated as central to the cultivation of mindfulness and the achievement of the Buddhist goal of awakening, its precise meaning often varied according to the context. This led Padmanabh Jaini to remark:

It must be admitted ... the precise meaning of *prajñā* itself remains obscure. One sometimes feels that nothing definite can be said beyond the statement that *prajñā* is something which was attained by the Buddha and is attainable by bodhisattvas.¹⁷

¹⁶What Patañjali means by ‘*prajñā*’ here is of course up for discussion. Is it to be viewed as a general term for wisdom/insight or does it denote something like the Abhidharma technical usage of the term as analytical insight into the nature of things, that is, as a form of analytic cognition?

¹⁷Jaini (1977: 403).

¹⁵Anālayo (2012: 214)

Nevertheless, it is clear that the general understanding of the term within the Nikāya literature is that it is through *prajñā* that one sees things as they are (*yathābhūta*). Although the term is often translated generically as 'wisdom' in English (a vague rendition that works well in obscuring underlying philosophical technicalities and tensions sometimes operating across traditions), within the Abhidharma literature it is clear that *prajñā* is used in a more technically precise sense to denote the faculty of 'analytical insight', that is the mental power (*bāla*) of analysing entities and breaking them down into their more basic elemental components—the *dharmas* that constitutes the underlying, impermanent flow of evanescent moments (*kṣaṇa*) which constitute our experiences. In the Southern/Theravāda tradition, Buddhaghosa explains that *prajñā* (*pañña*) is that which penetrates the own nature of things (*dhmma-sabhava-pativedha*, *Visuddhimagga* XIV, 7). *Pañña* then is explicitly linked to the cultivation of *vipassanā*, usually translated as insight. This is seen as a profound realization of the impermanent and dependently originated nature of entities. As Nanayakkara (1993: 580) notes 'Insight is not knowledge in the general sense, but penetrative knowledge acquired as a result of not looking *at* but looking *through* things'.¹⁸

However, it is important to note that *prajñā* is considered an *occasional* mental factor according to the Pāli Abhidhamma tradition, whereas in the Northern Abhidharma literature of the Sarvāstivāda/Vaibhāṣika (and much of the subsequent Mahāyāna literature which inherited and responded to the Northern traditions), it is seen as a *universal* factor present in all experience (if developed to varying degrees).

With the emergence of Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism in India from the first century BCE, we see a reaction to the Abhidharma approach and its scholastic analysis of experience into momentary events (*dharmas*). However, in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature this involves not a repudiation of the Abhidharma emphasis upon *prajñā*, but rather its intensification. *Prajñā*

involves the analytic reduction of the conventionally real entities of phenomenal experience into their underlying (and for the Abhidharma, ultimately real), dharmic components. The exercise of the faculty of *prajñā* is crucial in an Abhidharma context for establishing the distinction between ultimate (*paramārtha*) and conventional (*saṃvṛti*) entities made by Vasubandhu (1967) in *Abhidharmakośa* VI.4:

If the awareness of something does not operate after that thing is physically broken up or separated by the mind into other things, it exists conventionally like a pot or water; others exist ultimately.¹⁹

Thus, the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature accepted the Northern/Sarvāstivāda inclusion of *prajñā* as a universal factor in experience and indeed presupposed it as the basis for the universalization of the ideal of the *bodhisattva* and the goal of achieving full awakening for all sentient beings. However, it criticized the Abhidharmic enterprise for failing to take its own reductive analysis of experience to its final conclusion, that is a recognition of the emptiness of *dharmas* themselves. *Prajñā*, or analytical insight, required further intensification (to be achieved by 'practising the perfection of *prajñā*'). Within this context, wisdom (*jñāna*) in its most advanced forms came increasingly to be characterized as non-conceptual (*nirvikalpa*) in nature.

Mahāyāna and the Emergence of a Non-dualistic Understanding of Mindfulness

Within those strands of what became Mahāyāna Buddhism, we see the emergence of a more avowedly non-dualistic conception of reality. The dominant intellectual approaches in Indian Mahāyāna, building upon the *Prajñāpāramitā* worldview, emphasized the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all *dharmas*. Although the precise nature of this emptiness was conceived of slightly differently between early Mahāyāna schools such as the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, they both

¹⁸Nanayakkara (1993). It is linked to a growing awareness of the three marks of existence.

¹⁹*Abhidharmakośa* VI.4, translation by Buescher (1982).

continued the radicalization of the no-abiding-self teaching (*anātman*) and accorded a central role to *prajñā* in Buddhist yogic practice. The non-dualistic spirit of these movements however opened up the possibility of a greater emphasis upon what Dunne (2013) calls the ‘innateist’ strand of Buddhist thought, that is an approach to awakening which sees it as the unveiling of a pure consciousness that *already exists* in a veiled form within each sentient being. Awakening (*bodhi*), on this model of consciousness, involves the realization of that which one already possesses, but which is hidden from view by the karmic defilements of consciousness. Buddhist mental training on this model became characterized as cleaning the mirror of consciousness so that it could directly reflect things as they are (*yathābhūta*). Indeed, as Olenzski suggests (2013: 67), the Northern Abhidharma tradition’s inclusion of *prajñā* as a universal mental factor provided a theoretical rationale for the innateist view (that the mind already contains the factors pertaining to an already awakened consciousness) to emerge. As suggested earlier, this understanding of the Buddhist path is asserted most strongly in the *tathāgatagarbha* (‘Buddha nature’) literature that emerges from around the third/fourth centuries CE and is further consolidated by later Mahāyāna developments such as Tibetan notions of ‘other emptiness’ (*gzhan stong*, propounded especially but not exclusively by the Jo nan pas)²⁰ and in meditative practices such as *dzogchen* which seek to uncover the pristine nature of consciousness.

Dunne (2013: 75) has argued that the accounts given of mindfulness practice in MBSR and MBCT programmes seem more intellectually akin to the non-dualistic innateist position than to the constructivist position that generally prevails in mainstream Abhidharma literature. Thus, he suggests:

non-dual traditions, striking a stance deliberately contrary to *Abhidharma* scholasticism, remain highly sceptical about the utility of evaluative thought in practice. Instead, one must become released from the very structures of such thoughts, since they are a manifestation of ignorance itself.²¹

Although the historical roots of the modern ‘mindfulness-only’ movement spring from late colonial Burma and Theravāda reformism, as Dunne suggests, the theoretical framework for modern mindfulness discourse often bears a closer resemblance to some forms of non-dualistic Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna conceptions of meditative practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn, for instance, suggests that his own formulation of MBSR reflects influences not only from the Theravāda *vipassanā* movement but also from Korean Zen. In general terms, however, influence may have less to do with direct Mahāyāna influence than with the diffusion of a broadly non-dualistic conception of ‘eastern spirituality’ that emerged first with figures like Swāmi Vivekānanda (1863–1902) and then circulated more generally in Western popular culture throughout the twentieth century.

However, the curtailment of judgement and ethical reflection are by no means absent in many non-dualistic accounts because, as we shall see, even within Buddhist trends with a strongly non-dualistic philosophical orientation (such as in the Zen-inspired Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh and David Loy), the role of discernment and a deep cognition of the underlying causes of suffering remain central features of their conception of engaged mindfulness practice. In these accounts, the traditional emphasis upon the importance of *prajñā* in the cultivation of mindfulness is not only endorsed but also extended.

Buddhist Meditation: ‘Capitalist Spirituality’ or Anti-consumerist Resistance?

In a number of his writings, Slavoj Žižek, a *doyen* and *enfant terrible* of contemporary ‘critical theory’ circles but hardly any kind of expert

²⁰For discussions of *gzhan stong* see Ruegg (1989); Hookham (1991); Kapstein (2000); Smith (2001). Nhat Hanh (1991), ‘tation and activity,ultural associations of ’ization of the ideal of the bodhisatvva—the ka and Yoshe.

²¹Dunne (2013: 79).

in the history of Buddhism, has argued that 'New Age Asiatic thought' is 'establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism'. (Zizek 2001: 12). According to Zizek (2001: 13):

the "Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary volume to his *Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.

Zizek's account however reflects a poor understanding of the rigour and diversity of the Buddhist traditions and practices that he so readily dismisses and is part of a wider agenda in his work in seeking to promulgate a 'non-religious Christianity' as the underlying cultural identity of the West and defend it from foreign importations and influences. Putting aside the considerable flaws in Zizek's polemical arguments for the moment,²² the question of distinguishing between the rich diversity of Buddhist traditions in their historical context and the ways in which they are being deployed and represented in a modern 'late capitalist' context is an important issue to be addressed in any attempt to understand modern discourses of "mindfulness", their roots and their relationship to historical forms of Buddhism. What Zizek rather casually refers to as 'Western Buddhism' or 'New Age Asiatic thought' (and which he often conflates with 'Buddhism' and 'Taoism' as a whole) is really an aspect of what I have called elsewhere 'capitalist spirituality' (Carrette and King 2005). Indeed, it is the latest manifestation in a long history of Western Orientalist fantasies about 'the mystic East' (King 1999), generated and perpetuated by a continuous flow of corporate advertising, marketing and popular cultural images of 'eastern spirituality'. It is vital that we do not confuse these trends with the rich and diverse Buddhist traditions that they so actively misrepresent, not based upon some traditional Orientalist appeal to the authority of original forms, but rather to be able to understand

from the perspective of an informed history of ideas, the sense in which modern discourses of mindfulness carry forward and translate long-established debates and tensions about the nature of mental training (*bhāvanā*) in the Buddhist tradition, and also ways in which they represent significantly innovative developments in response to the demands and context of twenty-first-century life.

Just as the early Buddhist movement in India developed its conception of mind training in response to prevailing attitudes and practices of its day (what I am calling the 'yogic philosophical milieu' of classical Indian thought), contemporary discussions of 'mindfulness' are articulated in relation to their own cultural/intellectual influences. In seeking to identify some of the key cultural, social and political markers that are reframing the discourse of mindfulness in the early twenty-first century, I wish to draw attention to three factors: detraditionalization, capitalist globalization and the impact of new digital technologies on human consciousness.

'Eastern Spirituality' and the DeTraditionization of Buddhism

Firstly, with regard to the process of the detraditionalization of Buddhist ideas and practices, the transformation of Asian religions into 'eastern spiritualities' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has of course also rendered such established cultural traditions as more readily exportable to the West, leading to the development of what Heelas (1996) has called the 'self-spiritualities' associated with the New Age and to the commodification and marketing of yoga (for instance) as a physicalized therapy and aid to 'lifestyle enhancement' in a late twentieth-century context alongside the popularity of MBSR practices. Zizek then is partly correct in that 'Buddhism' has indeed seen the greatest market potential for 'New Age Capitalists' in the West.

As many scholars have noted, the spread of modern 'mindfulness-only' practices is linked to

²²For a critique of Zizek's arguments in this regard see Bowman (2007).

the twentieth-century revival of Theravāda meditation in Southeast Asia and to the impact of figures such as Burmese monk Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904–1982) and his student and translator Nyanaponika Thera (German-born Siegmund Feniger 1901–1994) in simplifying and codifying a form of ‘insight-only’ meditation accessible to the laity (see for instance Braun 2013). The roots of the modern mindfulness movement lie in the late colonial and twentieth-century period, where Western fascination with ‘the mystic East’ (King 1999) was consolidated and combined with claims about the scientific and/or humanistic nature of the Buddha and his teaching (Lopez 2009; McMahan 2008) to produce the conditions for the emergence of the *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) that has become so popular today. This would have been impossible without the earlier contribution of figures such as Swāmi Vivekānanda (1863–1902) and D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) who sought to distil the ‘universal’ message of ‘eastern spirituality’ from its specifically *Asian* cultural and religious underpinnings, thereby facilitating the migration and translation of classical Buddhist discussions of mental training into a modern psychologized discourse of ‘experience’ (Sharf 1995; King 1999; Carrette and King 2005). This is not a value-neutral decontextualization of Buddhist ideas, as is often claimed, but rather their *recontextualization* in terms of a new cultural, political and symbolic order (Sharf 1995; King 1999).

Building upon the rise of Buddhist modernisms in the last century, concepts, ideas and practices associated with Western conceptions of ‘Buddhism’ have become easily segregated from their cultural, cosmological and institutional origins through homogenizing discourses about ‘eastern spirituality’ (Carrette and King 2005) and MBSR practices that gain traction and popularity based upon the ancient and exotic cultural capital of ‘Buddhism’, but have a low level of engagement with Buddhist theories and practices. Moreover, since the dawn of European romanticism and then again since the 1960s, ‘eastern philosophies’ have been associated in the West with a kind of ‘countercultural’

exoticism that makes them hip, fashionable and fresh for those seeking an alternative to mass consumerism but also as an ‘alternative’ and exotic ‘spirituality’ that offers an edge in the competitive world of marketing and business management. Thus, Kabat-Zinn is able to make a double move whereby the cultural authority provided by the ancient Buddhist origins of ‘mindfulness’ can be deployed to give social capital and credibility to his techniques at the same time as a rapid disavowal of the particularity of those Buddhist roots are asserted through a decontextualized universalization of ‘mindfulness’ as simply the practice of attention.

Mindfulness is actually a practice. It is a way of being, rather than merely a good idea or a clever technique or a passing fad. Indeed, it is thousands of years old and is often spoken of as ‘the heart of Buddhist meditation’, although its essence, being about attention and awareness, is universal.²³

However, to understand the explosion of interest in mindfulness-related practices and techniques in the contemporary period it is inadequate to focus exclusively upon changing modes of ‘religiosity’. One must also consider what social, economic and political conditions have encouraged this popularity. What changes have precipitated the incredible demand for mindfulness-related practices in the early twenty-first century that have captured the attention of defenders and critics alike?

Digital Technologies, Distracted Attention and the Problem of ‘Information Overload’

A 2015 study (*Attention Spans*), commissioned by Microsoft Corp., recently suggested that

²³ Jon Kabat-Zinn, Foreword to Williams and Penman (2011: 10). Indeed in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 2010, Kabat-Zinn goes even further, remarking that ‘Mindfulness, the heart of Buddhist meditation, is at the core of being able to live life as if it really matters. It has nothing to do with Buddhism. It has to do with freedom’. Cited by Morris (2010) <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/02/local/la-me-1002-beliefs-meditation-20101002>

widespread use of digital media technologies is having a deleterious effect on sustained and selective attention and contributing to a reorientation of human consciousness where 'alternating attention' (as in multitasking and switching between devices) was becoming enhanced.

[What information consumes is] the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. (Herbert Simon 1978 Nobel Prizewinner for Economics)

The fast-paced nature of contemporary digital communications, the 'information overload' that this creates, when combined with a neoliberal conception of the individual as a high-functioning 'entrepreneur of oneself' (Rose 1996, 1999) has arguably contributed to unprecedented levels of stress and depression. This phenomenon—what Jock Young (2007) has called the 'vertigo of late modernity'—has created a demand for techniques to master and control attention. For this reason, a critical analysis of the modern mindfulness movement, from the point of view of the history of ideas, must also examine the modern history of distraction (Löffler 2014), its mediated intensification in an age of fast-paced digital technologies, the levels of stress and anxiety produced by continually dispersed attention in an age of perceived economic and social precarity and the requisite demand this has created for a variety of relaxation techniques such as yoga and mindfulness-related practices that seek to intensify self-awareness and promote a non-distracted sense of emotional integration, calmness and well-being.

We are moving from a world where computing power was scarce to a place where it now is almost limitless, and where the true scarce commodity is increasingly human attention.
(Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft)

In an era of digital 'information overload' delivered through multiple devices (multichannel 24-hour television, smart phones, computers, tablets), the emphasis has shifted away from *advertising* products to *adverting* the attention of human beings towards those products. Thus, in a data-saturated marketplace, capturing the attention of the potential consumer has now become

the emergent issue for corporate marketing strategies looking to gain a competitive edge over their opponents in the marketplace:

In post-industrial societies, attention has become a more valuable currency than the kind you store in bank accounts. The vast majority of products have become cheaper and more abundant as the sum total of human wealth increases. Venture capital dollars have multiplied like breeding hamsters. The problems for businesspeople lie on both sides of the attention equation: how to get and hold the attention of consumers, stockholders, potential employees and the like, and how to parcel out their own attention in the face of overwhelming options. People and companies that do this succeed. The rest fail. *Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success. Welcome to the attention economy*' (my italics for emphasis).²⁴

This new frontline in the global economy of proliferated advertising has precipitated a corporate-driven demand for techniques that seek to capture, master and control attention. Similarly, longer lifespan, population growth and the spread of a neoliberal conception of the state as increasingly withdrawn from providing public services and social welfare have led to a widespread privatization of health and social welfare provision. This has generated a demand in health-care systems worldwide for effective, non-invasive and above all 'cost-efficient' techniques for enhancing patient health and well-being. Thus, a critical understanding of the emergence of the modern mindfulness movement must consider *not only the impact of consumer capitalism and new digital technologies, but also the modern history of mediated distraction* (Löffler 2014) and the levels of stress and anxiety engendered by changing lifestyles, occupational patterns and new technologies (such as email) that demand a state of continually dispersed rather than sustained attention. This cognitive 'switching' demanded by these aspects of modern life has led to a growing demand for relaxation techniques such as yoga and 'mindfulness' that soothe a purposely displaced mind and seek to intensify self-awareness and promote a

²⁴Davenport and Beck (2001: 3).

non-distracted sense of emotional integration, calmness and well-being.

I wish to argue that this context is producing a discursive split between two significantly new developments within what has been called ‘Buddhist modernism’ (see McMahan 2008) and related secular proponents of ‘mindfulness’ practice. At the same time, as some see ‘Buddhism’ as the perfect customizable ‘spirituality’ for the contemporary ‘entrepreneur of the self’ in a neoliberal social context,²⁵ Buddhist teachings and traditions of practice also continue to resonate with those interested in developing counter-cultural resistance to ‘Western materialism’ and consumerism, especially within what has become known as ‘Engaged Buddhism’.

The Contemporary Reworking of an Ancient Debate: Does Mindfulness Involve Mental Analysis and Ethical Judgment?

The capitalist-oriented trend is exemplified in the business world by the proliferation of ‘spiritual management’ courses exploring ‘Eastern’ philosophical themes and meditative practices with the aim of promoting workplace productivity, short-term stress-relief for employees and profit generation, and also by various forms of ‘prosperity Buddhism’ such as the *Dhammakaya* movement in contemporary Thailand. The counter-consumerist trend manifests itself in contemporary Thai movements such as the Santi Asoke and in transnational trends such as the various forms of ‘Engaged Buddhism’ which seek to highlight social injustice and challenge what is usually seen as corporate-driven consumerism and materialism within contemporary society. The distinction between these two Buddhist strands is not always as clear cut as it might seem, but much of their cultural authority in the contemporary world resides in what they both share in common, namely a reliance upon a

history of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes about Asian spirituality and philosophy that have circulated the globe in the last couple of centuries (King 1999; van der Veer 2013) and the development of transnational forms of ‘Buddhist modernism’ in the last century (Lopez 2009; McMahan 2008).

As a number of scholars have noted, this dominant popular trend, influenced by Mahāsi Sayadaw and Nyanaponika Thera, generally characterizes ‘mindfulness’ as a form of ‘bare attention’—a witnessing of mental, emotional and physical changes without any judgement or disturbance by an inquiring or analytic mindset. In the contemporary context, this has been reinforced by widespread popular cultural associations of ‘Zen’ in the West with ‘chilling out’ and pacifying mental agitation and activity. The second trend linked to the rise of an overtly political wing of what has become known as ‘Engaged Buddhism’ sees mindfulness practice as a form of *consciousness-raising* with regard to social, political and economic injustice, driven by a conceptualization of *duḥkha* as having sociopolitical as well as individual dimensions. As Nhat Hanh himself notes:

When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both – to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism, Mindfulness must be engaged. One there is seeing, there must be acting We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help.²⁶

Nhat Hanh is quite explicit in noting that attention to the causal conditions out of which our everyday experiences emerge involves a mindful awareness of their interdependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). This is pretty standard fare from a traditional Abhidharmic point of view. Of course, Nhat Hanh approaches mindfulness

²⁵For a useful discussion of the rise of the ‘entrepreneur of the self’ in neoliberal contexts see the works of Rose (1996, 1999).

²⁶Nhat Hanh (1991).

practice from the point of view of Mahāyāna--based Zen notions of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and a non-dualistic worldview. He extends this philosophy through his notion of 'interbeing'. Thus,

If you wish to have the insight of *Interbeing* you only need to look at a basket of fresh green vegetables which you have just picked. Looking deeply, you will see the sunshine, clouds, compost, gardener and hundreds of thousands of elements more. Vegetables cannot arise on their own, they can only arise when there is sun, clouds, earth etc. If you take the sun out of the basket of vegetables the vegetables will no longer be there. If you take the clouds away it is the same.²⁷

Most of the time Nhat Hanh describes these kinds of mindful moments in a way that reflects a spirituality of ecological interdependence and perhaps a recognition of the impact of our individual patterns of consumption.²⁸ Other advocates of Engaged Buddhism such as David Loy, Steven Batchelor²⁹ and Phra Payutto³⁰ are also explicit about the crucial role that ethics and ethical judgements play in mindfulness practice. However, the recognition by engaged Buddhists that *duḥkha* in fact is not merely an *individual* experience of existential dissatisfaction, but are also formed by instances of social suffering and structural injustice, opens up the possibility that to be *truly* mindful of the causal conditions that produce, say, your experience of eating chocolate, would necessitate an awareness of the

history of slavery and ongoing economic exploitation of populations in relation to the cocoa plantations out of which the chocolate was produced and transported. This intellectual move, it strikes me, takes mindfulness practice into a new dimension that of facilitating a geopolitical or global awareness of 'interdependence' and the ways in which the lives of others impact upon our most basic everyday experiences—especially in facilitating a remembrance of history (*smṛti*, traditionally translated) and a structural awareness of the economic, political and ecological dimensions of consumption.³¹

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, our feelings, our minds and the world. Each day 40,000 children die of hunger. The former superpowers still have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads, enough to destroy the Earth many times. Yes, the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects.³²

Note in the above quote how Nhat Hanh begins with the standard four objects of meditation as outlined in the *Mahā-saṭṭipathāna Sutta*, viz. the body, sensations, the mind and mental objects (*dhammas*, here glossed as 'the world') and then juxtaposes this to instances of mass-suffering and military capacities for state-induced violence. This is a clear extension of the range of 'awareness' from individual experience to a sociopolitical level and reflects an attempt to link individual spiritual practice with a geopolitical consciousness, a development that Raphaël Liogier has

²⁷Nhat Hanh (2004), (see webpage: <http://www.purifymind.com/ManNotEnemy.htm>).

²⁸See for instance, Nhat Hanh (2009).

²⁹Steven Batchelor asserts that 'Ethics as practice beings by including ethical dilemmas in the sphere of meditative awareness- to be mindful of the conflicting impulses that invade consciousness during meditation. Instead of dismissing these as distractions (*which would be quite legitimate when cultivating concentration*), one recognizes them as potentials for actions that may result in one's own or others' suffering.' (my italics for emphasis). See Batchelor (1993).

³⁰Payutto, for instance asserts that '*Buddhadhamma* emphasizes the importance of *sati* at every level of ethical conduct. Mindfully conducting your life and your practice of the *Dhamma* is called *appamāda*, or conscientiousness [and is] of central importance to progress in the Buddhist system of ethics'. Reciprocally, 'proper ethics have value because they because they nurture and improve the quality of the mind'. Payutto (1995).

³¹The best example I have found of this in Nhat Hanh's writings are his reflections on his poem '*Please Call Me By My True Names*' where Nhat Hanh makes explicit the link between the individual and the political: 'Do our daily lives have nothing to do with our government? Please meditate on this ... When we pick up a Sunday newspaper, we should know that in order to print that edition, which sometimes weighs 10 or 12 lb, they had to cut down a whole forest. We are destroying our Earth without knowing it. Drinking a cup of tea, picking up a newspaper, using toilet paper, all of these thing to do with peace. Nonviolence can be called 'awareness' We must be aware of what we are, of who we are, and of what we are doing.' See Nhat Hanh (1988: 31–39).

³²Nhat Hanh (1987).

described as the ‘individuo-globalist ideology’ of such engaged forms of Buddhism.³³ From this kind of vantage point, mindfulness practice explicitly involves not only the exercise of ethical judgements and analysis of underlying causal processes but also the fostering of a ‘deep’ cognition of the geopolitical dimensions of individual experiences. Thus, Sulak Sivaraksa makes the claim that:

On a political level, mindfulness can help in our work against consumerism, sexism, militarism, and the many other isms that undermine the integrity of life. It can be a tool to help us criticize positively and creatively our societies, nations and even cultural and religious traditions. Rather than hate our oppressors, we can dismantle oppressive systems. Is the international economic system that demands unlimited growth inherently defective? From a Buddhist perspective, the answer is yes.³⁴

By contrast, as we have seen, building upon Nyanaponika Thera’s focus upon ‘bare attention’, contemporary secular accounts of mindfulness practice tend to focus upon an attitude of passive acceptance and a suspension of critical reflection when practising mindfulness.³⁵ Thus, Mark Williams, Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and former Director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at Oxford University and Danny Penman, a meditation teacher and journalist, in outlining the significance of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), make the claim that ‘Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself.’³⁶

Conclusion

Both the MBSR/MBCT and Engaged Buddhist developments resonate with ancient strands within earlier Buddhist discussions of mental training (*bhāvanā*). The first, in the emphasis placed upon a

suspension of ratiocination, is arguably more closely associated with the path of concentration (*śamatha-yāna*) and the quiescence of cognition, but has a long history in Buddhist literature, reinforced by the emergence of non-dualistic interpretations of the Buddha’s message which in some instances see the goal of mental training as the cultivation of a form of non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa jñāna*) grounded in the cultivation of equanimity (*upekṣā*). It is perhaps ironic that the modern practice of ‘mindfulness-only’ is generally characterized by an abandonment of the long-standing emphasis upon the cultivation of ‘concentration’ techniques designed to stabilize and quieten the mind, when the characterization often provided of what such mindfulness practice entails bears more of a resemblance to the establishment of mental quiescence rather than achieving greater cognitive acuity. One explanation for this is that what is being discussed in many accounts of ‘suspending judgement’ during mindfulness practice corresponds to what would have been seen in a traditional Buddhist context as a fairly preliminary act of mental cleansing required for beginners (what Nyanaponika calls ‘tidying up the mental household’)³⁷ rather than the cultivation of a highly rarefied and concept-free state of awareness as in the advanced *samādhis*. As Dreyfus (2013: 52) notes:

By over-emphasizing the non-judgemental nature of mindfulness and arguing that our problems stem from conceptuality, contemporary authors are in danger of leading to a one-sided understanding of mindfulness as a form of therapeutically helpful spacious quietness.

The second trend in modern accounts of mindfulness builds upon the emphasis in many Buddhist texts on the role of *paññā/prajñā*—analytical insight—as a deconstructive analysis of entities into the evanescent *dharmas* that are said to constitute the underlying complexity that makes up our experiences. This second approach places great emphasis on the role of judgement and discernment in ‘witnessing’ one’s experiences, mental reflection upon the underlying causes of their emergence and an ethical consciousness to

³³Liogier (2004).

³⁴Sivaraksa (2011: 83).

³⁵For an insightful discussion of Nyanaponika’s focus on ‘bare attention’ as a characterisation of *sati* see the discussion in Bodhi (2013: 27f).

³⁶Williams and Penman (2011: 5).

³⁷Thera (1968: 1).

direct the mind gently towards ever more wholesome mental states (Sanskrit: *kuśalā dharmā*). In this second formulation of mindfulness, therefore, discernment, analysis and ethical judgement are part and parcel of the awakening experience. What is innovative however about the way this is being developed within some Engaged Buddhist literature and movements is the consideration of the geopolitical and economic dimensions of the causal nexus of the individual human experience. What we have then is an Engaged Buddhist reformulation of traditional discussions about *sati* in a way that reframes mindfulness as a geopolitical or planetary awareness of one's 'interbeing' (Thich Nhat Hanh) and the social, political and economic injustices that operate in the causal nexus of even our most everyday, subjective experiences. In this way, what we see emerging here is a Buddhist project for an ethical decolonization of consciousness in response to a perceived sense of growing global inequalities in an age characterized by neoliberal ideologies and capital-driven globalization. This, despite the claims of many Engaged Buddhists, is demonstrably new and an innovation in Buddhist discourses about mindfulness, as is the emphasis upon 'mindfulness-only' practices in general.

Our discussion has focused on two divergent trends in contemporary discourses of mindfulness. One trend, following Mahāsi Sayādaw and Nyanaponika Thera, represents 'mindfulness' as a form of 'bare attention'—a largely pacified 'witness consciousness' devoid of judgement or disturbance by an inquiring or analytic mindset (see Sharf 2014a; Dreyfus 2013) and is the dominant, popular characterization of mindfulness in the secular, scientific, military and business worlds. In contrast, the second trend, linked to what has become known as 'Engaged Buddhism', emphasizes an extensive role for ethical reflection and mental cognition, arguing that mindfulness denotes an awareness of our radical *interbeing* (as in Thich Nhat Hanh's (re-) formulation of the Buddhist teaching of *pratīyasamutpada*) and even a recognition of the *geopolitical* dimensions of individual experiences (such as awareness of the history of colonial exploitation and economic inequality of cocoa plantations as causal factors in

one's experience of eating chocolate). Both interpretations build upon ancient strands: the first in the emphasis placed upon an abandonment of ratiocination and the quiescence of cognition (Griffiths 1986; Sharf 2014b) and the second by resonating with the emphasis in many Buddhist texts on the role of *paññā/prajñā*—analytical insight (i.e. a deconstructive analysis of entities into the evanescent *dhammas* that constitute our experiences) and an ethical concern to direct the mind towards wholesome mental states (Sanskrit: *kuśalā dharmā*). Between these two characterizations, there are of course a multitude of practices and emphases and it is not my intention to suggest that all practices seeking to promote mindfulness meditation fall easily into either of these camps. The different characterizations of mindfulness practices over the question of mental reflection and ethical judgement have ancient roots but are today reflective of the struggle to represent the implications and importance of modern mindfulness practices in an age of economic and social anxiety about the impact of consumerism and rapid neoliberal globalization. Together, these two ends of the spectrum embody two sides of an emerging fault line about the meaning and significance of mindfulness practice in the twenty-first century.

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