

Mindfulness and Self-deliverance to Pure Presence

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Abstract

In the contemporary (Western) literature on mindfulness many authors present it as only a mental practice, which may bring one to a more successful and effective working of the mind, as well as different kinds of mental concentration. However, at least in part of Buddhist literature mindfulness is taken as an inseparable part of the Eightfold Way, and not as a means to achieve a separate mental aim. Another important emphasis of Mahayana Buddhism is that mindfulness does not aim at something new, but instead leads our awareness towards a deeper origin, which has already been present with us. While the initial form of mindfulness clings to various methods and achievements, the higher form lies bare in the present moment, always ready to reveal itself. When we are ready to let go of all that we achieve and do, we can surrender our being to the here and now.

Key words: mindfulness, Buddhism, method, eightfold path, emptiness, compassion

Izveček

V sodobni (zahodni) literaturi o čuječnosti mnogo avtorjev predstavlja čuječnost le kot mentalno prakso, ki naj privede do uspešnejšega in učinkovitejšega delovanja uma, pa tudi do različnih oblik koncentracije duha. Vendar je vsaj v delu budistične literature čuječnost razumljena kot neločljiv del osmeročlene poti, in ne kot metoda oz. sredstvo za doseganje nekega posebnega mentalnega cilja. Drugi pomemben poudarek predvsem v mahajanskem budizmu je v tem, da čuječnost ne meri na nekaj novega, temveč vodi do pozornosti na nekaj izvirnega, ker je že vseskozi prisotno. Podana je razlika med začetno obliko čuječnosti, ki se drži raznih metod in razlik, ter višjo obliko, ki se dogaja v Zdajšnjost in presega vse, kar se da doseči ali storiti in nam odpira to, kar leži tik pred nami, če smo pripravljeni pozabiti na sami sebe in se prepustimo le biti tu in zdaj.

Ključne besede: čuječnost, budizem, osmeročlena pot, praznina, sočutje

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Introduction

In its historical origin the methodical nurturing of mindfulness is quite far from today's Western world. It originates in Buddhism, and specifically in the meditation of insight (*vipassana*) of early Buddhism. Still, there is now a growing interest in mindfulness in the West, as people look for simple and efficient methods of coping with their anxieties, stress, lack of concentration and other troubles, particularly among those who occupy positions with greater responsibility (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013). The nurturing of mindfulness is also quite widespread in various Western therapeutic and spiritual movements, both those that are part of traditional religions and those that spring from new age spiritual movements. Persistent training and methodical nurturing of mindfulness is believed to lead to a "stress-less mind", "higher awareness", and higher levels of concentration. To be sure, this is an explicitly instrumental view of mindfulness, that is, as a means to achieve healthy mental states, better relationships, enlightenment and even various "divine" states of consciousness.

This essay will not deal with the current "uses" and "practices" of mindfulness, but rather it addresses the spiritual essence of the nurturing of mindfulness as seen in early Buddhism, as well as some other spiritual practices. As such, a non-instrumental view of mindfulness will be outlined in this paper, with a focus on Buddhism but also drawing in other aspects of its origins.

Buddhist Conceptualisation of Mindfulness

From the original Buddhist texts, and especially those speeches that are widely attributed to Buddha himself, it follows that mindfulness (Pāli *sati*, Sans. *smṛti*) is a constituent part of the so called Eightfold Path that leads to Enlightenment and *nirvana* (Pāli *nibbana*)¹. To some extent it is even possible to equate Buddhist meditation with the nurturing of mindfulness.²

For Buddha, the Eightfold Path is the fourth of the noble truths that relate to suffering (*dukkha*), the causes of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way that leads to this end. The Eightfold Path consists of eight "rightness's" (*samma*): the right view, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right

1 Henceforth I will give Pāli or Mandarin expressions in brackets, while adding, if necessary, the simplified Sanskrit expressions that are often more familiar.

2 If we keep in mind that Buddhist meditation also includes various forms of concentration and self-absorption that require specific mental orientations and procedures that, strictly speaking, reach beyond the nurturing of mindfulness, while the latter is always included in them.

effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Although Buddha (as far as it is known) did not define these “rights” in detail, they are parts of an indivisible whole, where each depends on all the others.³ This means that a Buddhist meditator has to simultaneously and continuously develop and nurture all these parts, or must at least strive towards this. However, these rights are by no means to be mastered step by step, and in focusing on one so neglecting others on the way. In his book *The Path of Mindfulness (Pot pozornosti)*, dedicated to the basics of Buddhist meditation, Primož Pečenko writes that the moment of right mindfulness “encompasses all parts of the path, but the right mindfulness *is* the path, the goal of which is the deepening of the experiential understanding of the ‘four truths’ and the end of all inconvenience” (Pečenko 1990, 71).

Buddha sometimes placed mindfulness as one of the top five abilities of the enlightened man, with the full list being trust, energy (effort), mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. In this case these perfections form an indivisible whole, where one aspect depends on all others. However, it is true that in Buddha’s view, at least for a beginner, some parts are more important and thus should have more attention, as other parts of this “path” will sooner or later emerge in one’s consciousness. He thus devoted a number of discourses to the right view (Pāli *sama ditthi*) of his doctrine (*damma*), the right actions (*sama kammanta*), the right mindfulness (*samma sati*) and the right concentration (*samma jhana* or *sama samadhi*). One of the longest and most celebrated of Buddha’s sutras—*The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (Mahasatipatthana sutta)*, as well as some other sutras, are devoted to the nurturing of mindfulness.⁴

Perhaps this is why mindfulness or the nurturing of it, at least in regards to early Buddhism, became the main spiritual practice of this new philosophy. Buddha even states that nurturing of mindfulness is “the only way that cleanses the beings, leads beyond sadness and tears..., brings to the path of recognition and to the experience of *nirvana*” (ibid., 194). However, in these texts Buddha also continuously linked (the right) mindfulness with other constituent elements of Buddhist practice, and especially with the right view, right mindfulness and right concentration.

In the sutra mentioned above Buddha views the conscious nurturing of mindfulness as the only path to the purification of the mind, and thus to *nirvana*. This

3 It is in *The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness* that Buddha very briefly defines each of these rights. Among these, he states that the most important are: the right effort, the right mindfulness and the right concentration.

4 I use the translation by Maurice Walsh (1995) given in his translation of *Digha Nikaya (The Collection of Long Discourses)*.

path consists of the mindful and correct contemplation of the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind, and in general all mind-objects as mind-objects.

What does the phrase “contemplation of the body as body, ... mind-objects as mind-objects” mean? In short, it means the mindful and passionless contemplation of these constituent parts of the sensory-phenomenological world, that is, seeing them only as phenomena of a certain kind, not linked to judgements, resistance or attraction. Buddha advises beginning with the contemplation of the simplest phenomenon of life and that which is closest to us, our own breathing. We then move on to contemplating our own body and its parts, its changing, aging and disintegrating. After this we move on to contemplating our feelings and the mind, their arising and passing away. Finally we engage in the contemplation of all phenomena in general, linked in their transience and co-dependence.

In parallel with the extension and deepening of mindfulness, here the Buddhist meditator should also develop the right insight (*samprajna*) of all the listed phenomena. We assume that this means the kind of comprehension that is in accordance with the fundamental rights of Buddhism, and is in itself a constituent part of the Eightfold Path. In the continuation of his discourse Buddha specifically points out that the disciple is able to contemplate diverse phenomena by contemplating the Four Noble Truths (Walsh 1995, 306–7). What is of key importance here is the ever deeper recognition of the internal intertwinement of all phenomena, their “selflessness” (*annata*), which means particularly the recognition of the disciple’s “own” selflessness that is spontaneously generated from the practice of mindfulness. With this the disciple spontaneously develops non-attachment instead of attachment to their ego.

Therefore, the nurturing of mindfulness should lead to awareness of these phenomena without any expressed mental, emotional and verbal framing, or identification of these phenomena as one’s own mind-objects. In another sutra, Buddha expresses this as the contemplation of the body, feelings, thoughts, as they get in touch with us, so that “in the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard there will be merely the heard; in what is thought of there will be merely what is thought of; in the cognized there will be merely the cognized (*vinnata*)” (from *Salayatana Sutte* in Tse-fu 2008, 20).

This especially applies to the potential awareness of oneself as a pure subject, the Divine Self (as postulated, for example, by the Brahman *Upanishads*). The highly mindful Buddhist meditators are indeed deeply aware of themselves but they naturally and spontaneously do not agree to any conceptualisation or “idea” of the self that would go beyond the immediacy of self-awareness, be it even about placing this self in the most “eternal”, divine or demonic worlds. Here the emphasis is on

the natural, non-artificial mental attitude that grows from the entire life practice of the Buddhist meditator, and not from some theological or anti-theological speculations.

Another important emphasis with regard to mindfulness, particularly in Mahayana Buddhist literature, is that it does not aspire to anything new, but only brings us to something original that has been present all the time, we were simply not aware of it (i.e., Buddha-nature, primary consciousness, Dao, Emptiness and similar). This is why the disciple is regularly instructed to silently observe what is going on both externally and internally, without making judgements and valuations, until the mind/consciousness calms down in itself and it is possible to see this primal, original thing.

About the Conceptualisation of Mindfulness, Mental Concentration (*jhana*) and Self-absorption (*samadhi*)

It is clear from these introductory presentations of Buddhist nurturing of mindfulness that the practice involves several related mental-spiritual orientations, and in particular various forms of mindfulness that are posited under one collective notion of “mindfulness”, rather than a single generalised concept. This does not mean, however, that in the continued, conscious nurturing of these forms of mindfulness that the various kinds do not come close to each other. In fact, they do more than this, as they connect into an indivisible whole that Buddha most often calls *concentration (jhana)* or also *self-absorption (samadhi)*. But this kind of concentration is not a goal that people aiming to nurture their individual mindfulness should aspire to, but is rather more of an actualisation of a capability that has always been present within them, and which is usually underdeveloped or ignored. This capability realises itself spontaneously, when in all areas of their psychophysical and external life the meditator reaches levels of mindfulness that are high enough. This is why Buddha speaks about the “fruits” rather than “goals” of right mindfulness.

While the nurturing of mindfulness is the foundation of all Buddhist meditation, the practice is especially intense and methodical in the so-called deep insight meditation (*vipassana*), which, among other things, is also important for the development of *chan (zen)* in Chinese and Japanese *mahayana* Buddhism, and *mahamudra* and *dzogchen* in Tibetan Buddhism. In *vipassana* the meditator keeps recognising all things ever deeper, all their feelings, emotions, wishes, and thoughts as inconstant, unsatisfactory and selfless (empty). Of course, it is the very understanding that is in accordance with the Four Noble Truths of Buddha.

However, the nurturing of mindfulness is also present in another main “wing” of the original Buddhist meditation, namely, the so-called meditation of spiritual peace (*samatha*) that is centred around various forms of concentration (*jhana*) and self-absorption (*samadhi*), since real concentration and self-absorption can only be achieved with the right extent of clear and non-judgemental mindfulness with regard to oneself. In particular, the *mahayana chan/zen* and high tantric meditative practices (*mahamudra*, *dzogchen*) go beyond the differences between *vipassana* and *samatha* meditation and favour a meditative culture which combines both.

In this context it should be noted that even the Buddha’s original “method” was something that comprised both *vipassana* and *samatha*. More precisely, the differentiation between these two approaches was more a matter in Buddhism’s later development rather than part of the original “teachings”. Instead, at different times Buddha puts the emphasis on different aspects of meditation, depending on the spiritual level and the readiness of his listeners to accept his words without resistance. In the “combined” meditation, the mindfulness of one’s own breathing plays a key role, and this is the beginning and end of the practice, as the meditator has to return over and over again to the seemingly simple awareness of their inhalation and exhalation in pure Now-ness. Even the temporary impression of the cessation of breathing that occurs in deep meditation has to be accompanied by a non-conceptual mindfulness that is still subtly breathing.

At first sight the nurturing of meditative mindfulness seems rather simple, and requires only persistence, exercise, and ethical and mental discipline. This, however, is not so. The problem here is how can the practice of silent and passive observation of internal and external phenomena be balanced with the active attention, alertness required by the mindfulness? Mindfulness consists of differentiation between wakefulness, alertness and non-wakefulness, between self and non-self, between stable concentration on the object of one’s mindfulness, and the decantation of consciousness. However, we should distinguish between the initial form of mindfulness, which still clings to various methods and differentiations, and a higher form that occurs in Now-ness beyond everything that we achieve or do, and that offers us what is revealed in itself, if we are ready to forget about ourselves and enter a mindful existence in the here and now.

Mindfulness as Self-deliverance to Pure Presence

At the end of *The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (Mahasattipatthana sutra)*, Buddha says that the disciple who achieves the right mindfulness (concentration) observes all phenomena in the light of the Four Noble Truths,

understands their coming into being and disappearing, and that there is nothing behind them. As such he lives independently and attached to nothing in the world (Pečenko 1990, 210).

This is not only a special state of mental clarity and concentration, but also the state of spontaneous compassion and well-being that goes beyond all wishes, attachments or desires. Mindfulness is thus increasingly less an achievement or effort of the individual, and ever more a state of being that coincides with the individual's everyday wakefulness. The condition for this, however, is the individual's readiness to completely transcend the attachment to their ego. When this occurs, it is possible for them to see the emergence of inner states that cannot be achieved by an individual's personal endeavours alone, because the efforts of the individual to maintain mindfulness are joined by impulses that stem from their total devotion to the selfless interdependence of all phenomena (Pāli *paticcasamuppada*, Sansk. *pratityasamutpada*). The individual then develops a very subtle orientation to the world and themselves, which I call the *spontaneous self-deliverance to pure presence*. No special mental effort is needed to maintain mindfulness here, because mindfulness becomes an inseparable aspect of the very being of the individual. At this level of awakening even the desire to attain *nirvana* is absent, because *nirvana* is seen here and now in the world as it is. This is a form of mindfulness that supersedes the initial form which still clings to various methods and differentiations. It takes place in Now-ness beyond anything that one achieves and does, and gives us what is lying bare in front of us if only one is ready to forget oneself and surrender to pure presence, i.e., to being in the here and now.

In later Buddhism this understanding of mindfulness goes so far as to reach beyond the practice of explicitly nurturing it or even engaging in meditation. Both the Chinese *chan* as well as in the Tibetan schools of *mahamudra* and *dzogchen* speak about “non-mindfulness” or “non-meditation”. Rather than implying the negation of mindfulness or meditation, such a complete fusion of spiritual endeavours with everyday life makes them seem “nothing special”, a perfectly natural part of everything that an individual does and experiences in their life. At this point, the clarity of an individual's consciousness (mind) merges into one with their insight into an emptiness that escapes all categories and notions we could use to express this. The basic characteristics of this state of awareness are clarity, emptiness and non-objectivity, original and permanent mindfulness unrelated to place or time, and yet being in the here and now with each and every one of us (Ule 2001, 74).

Similar to *chan* (*zen*), in Tibetan Buddhism this state of consciousness is often also called “natural” or “a knowing state of mind/consciousness” (Sansk. *vidya*,

Tib. *rigpa*, Man. *pen xin*) or also “everyday mind”. This is done to indicate both the spontaneity and non-artificiality of this state, as well as to highlight the fact that our non-enlightened everyday mind is, in its core, equal to the enlightened mind, although in their ignorance and limited understanding of such things most people do not allow this awareness or reality to come to life within them. Therefore, from the very beginning the serious practice of mindfulness is a (self-)expression of one’s natural spirit, rather than a way to achieve the natural state of mind. This is why we need to remain faithful to this practice until it becomes something that is entirely natural.

This is the essence of the practice of meditative mindfulness as summarised by Tilopa, one of the Indian Buddhist sages from the tenth to the eleventh centuries, who were extremely important for the later development of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly Mahamudra: “Don’t recall. Don’t imagine. Don’t think. Don’t examine. Don’t control. Rest (in the natural state)” (from Takuin 2007, 171).

Similarly, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, an important Tibetan teacher from the twentieth century, who was also a Mahamudra and Dzogchen master, expressed the essence of the mature practice of mindfulness, which he understood as the “the everyday practice”, as follows:

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and emotions, and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes into oneself. ... One should realize that one does not meditate to go deeply within oneself and withdraw into the world. In Buddhist yoga, even when meditating on chakras there is no introspection concentration: complete openness of mind is the essential point. ... When performing meditation practice one should think of it as just a natural function of everyday living, like eating or breathing, not as a special, formal event to be undertaken with great seriousness and solemnity. One must realize that to meditate is to pass beyond effort, beyond practice, beyond aims and goals, and beyond the dualism of bondage and liberation. (Khyentse Rinpoche 2000)

These words might seem subversive to those with good knowledge of Buddhism, or at least they may find them in discordance with Buddha’s words on mindfulness and meditation, since at least *samatha* meditation is about self-absorption, about the ever more intense internalisation of experiencing, thinking and trans-thinking, until we reach different kinds of total self-absorption (*samadhis*). We may also take a look at a typical image of Buddha, seated in meditation,

showing him as totally self-absorbed. However, we claim that this impression is wrong, as meditative concentration always involves both the internalisation of experiencing and an ever fresh view of what is going on around and within us. This is also where the Buddha's enigmatic smile comes from, as seen in various sculptures which also portray him seated and in meditation. He is thus shown as somebody who is capable of simultaneously maintaining a fresh view of the world around him along with the deepest internalisation, which together produce such a smile.

Conclusion

Higher forms of mindfulness transcend all instrumental concepts of mindfulness, i.e., concepts that view mindfulness as a means for achieving “healthier” or “higher” forms of mind; they even transcend the elaborate practice of mindfulness as such, but do allow for the notion of mindfulness as an essential quality of non-conceptual awareness involved in a spontaneous disentangling of all conceptual, emotional or affective knots and hindrances, and, most importantly, of the personal I as the basic knot of all wishes, fears, hopes, and suffering. The spontaneous self-deliverance to pure presence which characterizes higher forms of mindfulness is a moment of trans-personal being in the here and now of the meditating individual. It “appears” after the individual has managed to transcend all their worldly or spiritual aims and needs, and has learned to simply “be aware”. This “end result” of complete mindfulness seems to oppose our Western ideas of a healthy and mature person, conceived of as a subject constantly preoccupied with the world and oneself, and successfully managing all one's troubles. In order to comprehend the deeper dimensions of mindfulness the Western world still needs to move further to understand and accept the Buddhist wisdom of trans-personal self-deliverance to pure presence. If not, I fear that the current enthusiasm for mindfulness training in the West will lead its practitioners astray, getting them entangled into various methods of illusory and transitory quieting of the (still possessive) self, chronically preoccupied with the world and itself.

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