

## Attention and Mindfulness

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### Abstract:

The present article briefly examines attention and mindfulness in the way the functions of these two mental qualities emerge in selected Pāli discourse passages and their extant parallels. The survey shows that, alongside a considerable degree of affinity between the two, attention and mindfulness also differ in several respects. Early Buddhist mental analysis considers attention a constantly present mental quality, whereas mindfulness is intermittent, in the sense of needing to be aroused and, at least when cultivated by itself, stands for a more receptive quality of the mind. Descriptions of the deployment of attention cover a range of different functions, ranging from the more conceptual tasks of storing teachings in memory and later recalling them to the supportive role of facilitating experiences of deep concentration and liberating insight. In meditation-related contexts, attention is explicitly mentioned as a foundation for the cultivation of mindfulness. With later Buddhist traditions, understandings of attention and mindfulness evolved, leading to an increased similarity in function between these two qualities.

### Key words:

Attention; *manasikāra*; memory; mindfulness; *sati*; *smṛti*.

### Introduction

The need to distinguish between attention and mindfulness has been a topic of increasing interest in current research. As noted by Sharf (2016, p. 784), “the place of attention in Buddhism has recently emerged as an important topic of research among those interested in the psychology and neuroscience of meditation.” In the case of experiencing pain, for example, research has found that attention as such can increase affective reactivity (Lindsay and Creswell 2017), whereas mindfulness tends to have the opposite effect. Achieving some degree of meditative analgesia appears to be possible through the cultivation of a form of open monitoring rather than focused attention (Grant 2014). The arousal of an accepting attitude seems to be particularly responsible for the potential of even brief mindfulness trainings to have significant analgesic effects (Wang et al. 2019).

An understanding of the similarities and differences between mindfulness and attention, in the way these terms are used in clinical research, might benefit from a brief survey of relevant information found in selected early Buddhist texts. Although the connotations carried by the English term “attention” in Buddhist and Western psychology can hardly be expected to be just the same, a perusal of the notion and functions of attention, as understood in early Buddhist texts, might nevertheless provide relevant perspectives. In an attempt to provide a starting point

for such comparison, this article briefly examines references to the act of paying attention (Pāli *manasikāra*, Sanskrit *manaskāra*, Chinese 思惟, Tibetan *yid la byed pa*) in selected early Buddhist discourses, in comparison with mindfulness (*sati*, *smṛti*, 念, *dran pa*).

### **Active or Receptive?**

The quality of attention can be understood as having a somewhat more active nature, by way of selecting which data will be processed by the mind. The early Buddhist understanding of mindfulness, however, stands for a less active quality, at least when cultivated on its own, being more a receptive form of awareness. In a way, one could perhaps view mindfulness as being less about “doing” and more about “being.”

The distinction drawn in this way, which certainly does not intend to posit a black-and-white contrast, no longer holds true in the same way in later Buddhist traditions. In the case of the Theravāda exegetical tradition, for example, a development can be discerned that led to conceiving of mindfulness as a quality that plunges into the objects of the mind (Anālayo 2019c). This conveys considerably more active nuances and

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the employment of mindfulness in some contemporary insight meditation traditions emphasizes a rather vigorous form of paying attention, understood to be an implementation of mindfulness.

In early Buddhist texts, however, the act of plunging into the objects of the mind would probably have been associated rather with attention, perhaps in combination with concentration. Mindfulness as such, in contrast, appears to be more a stepping back from focus on a particular object in such a way as to enable seeing the whole picture. Again, this suggestion is not meant to convey a clear-cut distinction that would allow separating attention and mindfulness into two boxes. Mindfulness can collaborate with other mental factors in a state of mind that is focused, just as attention can be present when the mind is openly receptive. In fact, attention must be present even on such occasions, as according to early Buddhist psychology it is part of the basic setup of any state of mind.

### **Intermittent or Constant?**

Early Buddhist analysis of the mind considers mindfulness to be of an intermittent nature, in the sense of being a quality that is not present in every state of mind. As just mentioned, attention instead features among those mental factors that occur invariably in any state of mind. This position emerges in the context of a definition of “name,” which stands for the mental activities responsible for making sense out of the experience of materiality. These are defined as follows:

Friend, feeling tone, perception, volition, contact, and attention; these are called ‘name.’  
(SN 12.2: *vedanā saññā cetanā phasso manasikāro, idaṃ vuccati nāmaṃ*).

Feeling tone, perception, volition, contact, and attention; these are called ‘name.’

(EĀ 49.5: 痛, 想, 念, 更樂, 思惟, 是爲名; the third Chinese character here is doubtful, as it often renders *tarka* or *smṛti*, although according to Hirakawa (1997) it can occasionally also translate *saṃkalpa*, which appears to be the sense appropriate to the present context).

In the early Buddhist model of experience, together with “form” as the experience of materiality, name stands in a reciprocal conditioning relationship to consciousness. The continuous interplay between the stream of consciousness on the one side and the flux of name-and-form on the other side explains continuity in the absence of a permanent self.

This presentation implies that the five factors of name are a given of mental experience; they occur invariably when materiality is known. It follows that an essential distinction can be drawn between the mental qualities of attention and mindfulness, in that the former is indeed a constant but the latter an intermittent quality of the mind.

Due to this fundamental distinction, the task in relation to each of these two differs: In the case of mindfulness, the requirement is to “establish” this quality. This is why the formal cultivation of mindfulness takes the form of the four “establishments of mindfulness” (*satipaṭṭhāna*, *smṛtyupasthāna*, 念處, *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa*). In contrast, with attention there is no need for any establishing, as it is already present in every state of mind. For this reason, the crucial question is rather how such attention is being deployed. Hence, the discourses distinguish between attention that is “wise,” or more literally “penetrative” (*yoniso*), and attention that is unwise or superficial (Mejor 2001 and Anālayo 2009). The former is conducive to progress to liberation whereas the latter leads the mind further into bondage.

The distinction that emerges in this way, which is more decisive than the earlier-mentioned differentiation between active and passive nuances, also has undergone a change in later Buddhist traditions. In a strand of Sarvāstivāda exegesis, mindfulness became a quality present in every state of mind. Cox (1992/1993, p. 88) explained that

The mature description of the function of mindfulness in recollection cannot be understood except as an outcome of continual molding and adaptation of the primary senses of mindfulness as an attentiveness operative in praxis. Even the later debates between the different Abhidharma schools still echo this original primary sense within the confines of their respective doctrinal concerns.

For the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣikas, mindfulness is a mental event that occurs with regard to each object in every moment of psychic life. It enables the simultaneous insight or cognition of that object to occur and provides the necessary condition for later recollection. This specific doctrinal position, like many others, is both a motive for and a consequence of the general Sarvāstivāda philosophical model: that factors exist as real entities in the past, present, and future, but are radically momentary in terms of their activity ...

Therefore mindfulness ... even when past, can itself serve as the real cause for present recollection. In fixing or noting every present object, mindfulness performs an action essential for subsequent recollection.

The reasoning is that, since in principle any moment of experience can be recalled, it follows that at least some degree of mindfulness must have been present in every such moment.

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As a result, just as the somewhat more active nuances of attention came to be associated with mindfulness itself in Theravāda exegesis, similarly the ever-present nature of attention has become a property of mindfulness in Sarvāstivāda exegesis. Each of these Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness vis-à-vis attention is certainly meaningful within its respective doctrinal home. At the same time, however, it is vital to recognize such differences in understanding, rather than assuming that there is a single monolithic construct of mindfulness in Buddhism.

Whereas later exegesis regularly offers clear-cut definitions, the early Buddhist discourses, representing roughly the first two centuries in the development of Buddhist thought (Anālayo 2012), tend to be more elusive in this respect. This reflects their *ad hoc* delivery in a specific oral teaching situation. Hence, in order to explore the early Buddhist perspective on the nature of attention beyond what can be deduced from the above definition of name, a survey of selected passages that describe the actual functioning of attention can provide further information.

Needless to say, given that attention is already present in every state of mind, when a certain passage mentions it, this does not imply that attention could in principle have been completely absent. Instead, an explicit reference in a particular context means that attention must be performing a function sufficiently important to merit being highlighted. In other words, at times the ever-present function of attention is more in the background of the overall mental event in which it occurs. At other times, however, attention takes a more prominent role, and it is such a prominent role that the passages surveyed below must be highlighting in one way or another.

### **Retaining Oral Teachings**

In the oral setting of ancient India, the need to pay attention carefully during the delivery of a talk was naturally of considerable importance. Whereas nowadays much information is available in written form and any talk or spoken explanation can be recorded and accessed later, at the time of the Buddha and his disciples the moment of the orally delivery of a teaching was decisive. Allowing oneself to be carried away by fantasies or other distractions would result in an irretrievable loss of the information that had become temporarily available. Hence, a recurrent pericope in the early discourses shows the Buddha prefacing a teaching with a short admonishment to his disciples that they should now pay careful attention.

Listen and pay careful attention!  
(AN 7.52: *suñātha sādhukaṃ manasi karotha*).

Listen carefully, listen carefully and pay proper attention!  
(MĀ 6: 諦聽, 諦聽, 善思念之).

In addition to the need of paying careful or proper attention, however, mindfulness also has a significant contribution to offer in order to ensure that the teaching delivered orally will be available for recall on a subsequent occasion (Anālayo 2019a). Hence, the acquisition of learning and knowledge in the oral setting of ancient India required both mindfulness and paying careful or proper attention.

In fact, the phrase used in the above Chinese translation to convey the need to pay proper attention combines 思, presumably a shortened form of “attention,” 思惟, with mindfulness, 念; the combination of the two then being prefaced by the qualification “proper” or “well,” 善. The resultant phrase 善思念 can be viewed as a convenient reflection of the need for both attention and mindfulness at the time of listening to a talk. Although mindfulness is not explicitly mentioned in the Pāli formulation employed to encourage the listeners to pay attention, the desirability of its presence can safely be assumed to be implicit.

### Ignoring Unwholesome Thoughts

Whereas teachings worth learning should be given attention, the opposite holds when something keeps triggering unwholesome thoughts and reactions in the mind. How to proceed in such a situation emerges in a discourse that offers a series of methods to counter the recurrent arising of associations and reflections that are of a detrimental nature. The discourse begins with the advice that one should simply shift away from what is unwholesome and direct the mind to a wholesome topic instead. If that has not worked, one should face the unwholesome thoughts in the mind by firmly establishing a clear recognition of their detrimental nature. The attitude to be aroused in this way compares to the disgust one would feel on finding the carcass of a dead animal has been hung around one’s neck. If even that has not been sufficient to emerge from the unwholesome condition of the mind, one should try the following:

One should practice not being mindful of those thoughts and not giving attention to them.  
(MN 20: *tesaṃ vitakkānaṃ asati-amanasikāro āpajjitabbo*).

One should not be mindful of those thoughts.  
(MĀ 101: 不應念此念).

The main purpose of this instruction is the same in both versions. Whereas the Pāli discourse refers to both

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mindfulness and attention, its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel only has the first of these two. The idea that an instruction might encourage not being mindful, an element common to the two formulations, is perhaps at first sight unexpected, at least in the case of early Buddhist meditation instructions.

The implications of this encouragement need to be assessed within the context of the whole discourse’s presentation of alternative methods for overcoming unwholesome thoughts. In case the present approach should not be successful, the discourse still has other methods to offer. It

follows that mindfulness must be present while trying out the present method. Without some degree of mindful monitoring established, it will hardly be possible to know whether following the present instruction has led to emerging from the unwholesome condition of the mind or else has not been successful and another method is required. The ensuing instruction to employ still another approach, should the present one have failed to work, definitely requires that mindfulness has been present in its role of monitoring what is taking place.

This in turn implies that the recommendation in both versions not to be mindful is specifically related to the topic or problem in the mind that keeps triggering unwholesome thoughts and associations. This should no longer receive any attention.

In a way, one might think that the term “attention” would have been a preferable choice over “mindfulness” in the present context, but the translators of the *Madhyama-āgama* version rather opted for the Chinese character that usually renders “mindfulness” as well as “thoughts.” However, the same character can at times also render “attention”. This possibility appears to be relevant for several other instances, surveyed below, where a reference to “attention” in the Pāli version has its counterpart in this particular character in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. Anyhow, the task would indeed be to ignore intentionally what is directly responsible for the recurrent arising of negative thoughts in the mind. At the same time, however, mindfulness of the overall condition of the mind continues its task of monitoring, in order to be able to furnish the required feedback about the success or failure of this method to emerge from its unwholesome condition.

### **Recollecting a Simile**

Not only at the time of the actual delivery of a teaching but also during subsequent recall, the act of paying attention has a significant function to perform and for this reason deserves explicit mention. An example in case occurs in relation to the famous simile of the saw. The simile itself describes a rather dramatic situation where one is cruelly cut into pieces by bandits. Imagining oneself in such a horrible predicament, the instruction is that one should nevertheless refrain from reacting with hatred. The imagery invoked in this way serves as an inspiration when facing a situation provocative of anger, showing that even under the most extreme circumstances one might imagine, getting angry is not the appropriate response. By way of making this point, the delivery of the actual simile leads over to the recommendation that one should keep this teaching in mind so as to be able to bear with any type of hostile speech. Such keeping in mind finds expression in the following formulation:

You should frequently pay attention to the instruction on the simile of the saw.  
(MN 21: *kakacūpamaṃ ovādaṃ abhikkhaṇaṃ manasikareyyātha*).

You should frequently be mindful of the simile of the sharp saw.  
(MĀ 193: 汝等當數數念利鋸刀喻).

The task described here is to recollect the simile and take into account its implications. This involves a mode of recollection of the Dharma, in the sense of calling to mind an oral teaching given by the Buddha (and his disciples). Such recollection then provides a guideline or reference

point for adjusting one's mental attitude in such a way as to foster patience and forbearance in the face of verbal aggression.

### Entry into Deep Concentrative Experiences

The examples surveyed so far relate in one way or another to conceptual thought activity. Particularly the last instance of recollecting the simile of the saw and letting its implication serve as a guideline for the appropriate attitude in a challenging situation clearly pertains to the realm of thought and reasoning. The deployment of attention as such, however, can similarly fulfil an important role in a state of mind that is deeply absorbed and unified. Such deployment is overtly mentioned in descriptions of the attainment of the first immaterial sphere.

One of the requirements for dwelling in this experience is the overcoming of perceptions of variety. In assessing the significance of this particular prerequisite, it needs to be kept in mind that a considerable degree of unification of the mind must have been developed already at lower levels of concentration that build up to the attainment of the first immaterial sphere of boundless space (Anālayo 2019e). Hence, at the present juncture in meditative cultivation, the task is to maintain and deepen the unification cultivated earlier and beware of the intrusion of even the slightest trace of a perception of diversity. This task finds expression in the following way:

Without attending to perceptions of diversity.  
(MN 137: *nānattasaññānaṃ amanasikārā*).

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Not being mindful of perceptions of diversity.  
(MĀ 163: 不念若干想).

This case is in principle similar in kind to the instruction on countering unwholesome thoughts, although of course setting in at a completely different level of meditative depth.

Not only perceptions of diversity, but virtually all types of perception need to be left behind in order to gain another profound meditative experience, which is signless concentration:

Friend, there are thus two conditions for the attainment of liberation of the mind through signlessness: not attending to any signs and attending to the element of signlessness.  
(MN 43: *dve kho, āvuso, paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā samāpattiyā: sabbanimittānañ ca amanasikāro, animittāya ca dhātuyā manasikāro*).

There are two causes, two conditions, for arousing signless concentration. What are the two? The first is not being mindful of any sign; the second is being mindful of the element of signlessness.

(MĀ 211: 有二因二緣生無相定。云何爲二? 一者不念一切相, 二者念無相界; the phrasing given here is based on adopting the variant 相 instead of 想 in all three instances of its occurrence, even though this is recorded as a variant only once. These two Chinese characters are regularly confused with each other).

The “sign” stands for the marks and characteristics with which one cognizes and recognizes (Anālayo 2003). The “signless” in turn refers to forms of experience that no longer rely on the basic mental activity of trying to make sense out of what is experienced. The mind is not unconscious or asleep, but instead is endowed with a high degree of clarity and collectedness. Yet, a practitioner in this type of concentration no longer processes experiences, no longer takes up those signs that perception requires in order to make sense of phenomena. The idea of not paying attention in this way sets a precedent for a related concern evident in subsequent times in non-dual Buddhist practice traditions (e.g. Higgins 2006/2008).

The description in these two versions in a way complements the indications that already emerged on considering the first immaterial sphere of boundless space. In that case, however, the wording only described the need to beware of perceptions that would disturb the meditative abiding. In the present case, the negative task of needing to avoid the taking up of any sign comes together with the positive task of inclining the mind toward the element of signlessness. Both negative and positive tasks are to be executed with the same mental quality, showing that even in deeply concentrated meditative experiences the basic faculty of attention has a significant purpose to fulfil, significant enough to merit being explicitly noted.

The above description also raises the question of how to differentiate between concentration and attention. On following the Pāli version’s description (keeping in mind that the terminology employed in the Chinese translation might well reflect the same Indic term), the gaining of “concentration” on signlessness involves “paying attention” to the element of signlessness (in combination with not paying attention to any signs). This points to a close relationship between these two qualities, which also involves the same difference as that between attention and mindfulness. Whereas attention is constantly present, in early Buddhist thought concentration is another intermittent quality of the mind.

### **Internal Emptiness**

From an early Buddhist viewpoint, the cultivation of deeper levels of concentration has as its overarching purpose the gaining of liberating insight. An important type of insight described in the early discourse concerns the realization of the absence of a self, in the sense of revealing the empty nature of all aspects of subjective experience. Descriptions of a meditative abiding in emptiness internally can serve as yet another occasion for describing the deployment of attention:

One attends to emptiness internally.  
(MN 122: *ajjhataṃ suññataṃ manasikaroti*).

One is mindful of emptiness internally.  
(MĀ 191: 念內空).

One attends to emptiness internally.  
(Skilling 1994: 212: *nang stong pa nyid yid la bya*).



The Tibetan parallel's reference to "attention," in line with the terminology employed in the Pāli version, confirms that the translation choice adopted in the *Madhyama-āgama* passages surveyed above quite probably goes back to an Indic original that conveyed the same sense of "attention."

The practice described here also relates to a deep level of concentration, as the parallel versions agree in pointing out that one needs to stabilize the mind in imperturbability in order to dwell successfully in emptiness in this way. In its early Buddhist usage, imperturbability can serve to represent a deep level of concentration gained with the fourth absorption. The Pāli commentary confirms that this sense is appropriate to the present context. According to its indication, imperturbability here implies attending to the attainment of an

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immaterial sphere (Ps IV 161). Such attainment would require the meditative expertise of the fourth absorption (Anālayo 2020a).

### Attention as a Foundation for Mindfulness

Whereas several of the passages surveyed so far point to a similarity in function between attention and mindfulness, other contexts present these two qualities as building on each other. For example, wise attention can serve as a foundation for the cultivation of mindfulness and clear knowing. This role emerges in the context of a description of how various elements of practice gradually build on each other (Anālayo 2020b). In this setting, there is a need for having first built a foundation in wise attention in order to be able to cultivate mindfulness and clear knowing:

Monastics, I say, mindfulness and clear knowing also have a nutriment, they are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for mindfulness and clear knowing? It should be said: wise attention.

(AN 10.61: *satisampajaññaṃ p' ahaṃ, bhikkhave, sāhāraṃ vadāmi, no anāhāraṃ. ko cāhāro satisampajaññaṃ? yonisomanasikāro ti 'ssa vacanīyaṃ*).

For right mindfulness and right knowing there is also a practice, they are not without a practice. What is reckoned to be the practice for right mindfulness and right knowing? The answer is: right attention is the practice.

(MĀ 51: 正念正智亦有習, 非無習. 何謂正念正智習? 答曰: 正思惟爲習; another two parallels, T 36 and T 37, do not appear to cover this stage).

In this way, attention that is deployed in ways that are wise or right builds the foundation for mindfulness and clear knowing. In the same discourse, these two in turn lead, via sense restraint and perfection of ethical conduct, to the practice of the four establishments of mindfulness. Although the combination of mindfulness and clear knowing can apply to a range of different meditative experiences (Anālayo 2020b), in the present context the two qualities appear to stand for a somewhat more basic modality of practice, perhaps corresponding to the maintenance of decorum and circumspection during various bodily activities.

The central role of wise or right attention in this respect can be fleshed out further by turning to a juxtaposition of two sets of qualities, the hindrances and the awakening factors. Whereas the former quite literally “hinder” progress to awakening, the latter are qualities that “awaken” the mind. As a basic principle, unwise or wrong attention stimulates the hindrances, whereas wise or right attention can foster the arousal of the awakening factors (SN 46.24 and SĀ 704).

Mindfulness is the first of these awakening factors, whose arousal requires that wise or right attention be paid appropriately:

Monastics, there are things that are the basis for the awakening factor of mindfulness. Paying much wise attention to them, that is the nutriment for the arousing of the not arisen awakening factor of mindfulness and for the cultivation and fulfilment of the arisen awakening factor of mindfulness.

(SN 46.51: *atthi, bhikkhave, satisambojjhaṅgaṭṭhāniyā dhammā. tattha yoniso manasikārabahulīkāro, ayam āhāro anuppannassa vā satisambojjhaṅgassa uppādāya, uppannassa vā satisambojjhaṅgassa bhāvanāya pāripūriyā*).

Having paid attention to the four establishments of mindfulness makes the not yet arisen awakening factor of mindfulness arise and the already arisen awakening factor of mindfulness be aroused further so as to increase and augment.

(SĀ 715: 四念處思惟已, 未生念覺分令起, 已生念覺分轉生令增廣).

Monastics, what is the nourishment for the awakening factors of mindfulness? It is the four establishments of mindfulness; paying much wise attention to them, the not arisen awakening factor of mindfulness arises and the arisen one increases and augments.

(Up 5037): *dge slong dag dran pa yang dag byang chub kyi yan lag gi zas gang zhe na? dran pa nye bar gzhas pa bzhi rnams te. de la tshul bzhin du yid la byed pa lan mang du byed na dran pa yang dag byang chub kyi yan lag ma skyes pa dag skye bar 'gyur zhing skyes pa dag 'phel zhing rgyas pa dang yangs par 'gyur ro*).

In this way, wise attention is shown to have a rather intimate relationship to the cultivation of mindfulness, ranging from providing support for the basic establishing of mindfulness and clear knowing up to reaching the acme of liberating meditation practice by arousing the awakening factor of mindfulness.

Looking back over the few selected passages surveyed above, different modalities for the deployment of the basic function of attention emerge as being sufficiently important to merit explicit recognition. These cover careful listening during the delivery of a teaching and the subsequent recollection of an instruction received earlier for purposes of edification. Negative employments can involve ignoring unwholesome thoughts, staying aloof from perceptions of diversity, or avoiding the taking up of any signs in deep concentrative

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experiences. Dwelling in emptiness requires attention, just as the cultivation of formal mindfulness practices does. Behind the portrayal of these various deployments stands the need

for attention to be directed appropriately, in order to avoid that this constantly present mental quality leads the mind into unwholesome terrain.

## Memory

The considerable degree of overlap between attention and mindfulness that emerges in this way makes it quite understandable that in some later traditions these two qualities became fused to some degree. As mentioned above, this can be seen in the Theravāda tradition, where mindfulness took on a somewhat more active dimension, similar to focused attention, once it was seen as plunging into its objects. Conversely, in Sarvāstivāda traditions mindfulness turned into a quality found in any state of mind.

The latter development is of particular interest, as it involves the topic of memory. Relating this topic to mindfulness appears to have become particularly prominent in later exegetical traditions, due to the need to accommodate the theory of momentariness. Once all phenomena are seen as disappearing as soon as they have appeared, a way has to be found to explain the functioning of memory. From the viewpoint of the Sarvāstivādin position, discussed above, the proposed solution relies on the assumption that what happened in the past still exists in some form in the present (just as what is yet to come already exists in some form in the present). This is the basic “doctrine,” *vāda*, that “all exists,” *sarvaṃ asti*, reflected in the name of this Buddhist tradition as *sarva+asti+vāda* = Sarvāstivāda. From the viewpoint of this doctrinal position, mindfulness of what happened in the past enables recollection of this past event in the present.

The Theravāda solution proceeds differently, although similarly resulting in viewing mindfulness as being intrinsically a matter of memory. The recollective function associated in this way with mindfulness in scholastic Theravāda thought can best be illustrated with the example of recognizing the presence of unwholesome thoughts or states of mind. Such recognition is an integral part of mindful contemplation of the mind and of the hindrances in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. From the viewpoint of insight meditation in the tradition of Mahāsi Sayādaw, Śīlananda (1990, p. 97) explained the situation in this manner:

Good thoughts or bad thoughts, *kusala* (wholesome) or *akusala* (unwholesome) thoughts cannot coexist. These thoughts are not really “present” at the moment meditators come to know them, because these thoughts cannot coexist with the knowing of them ... at the moment of observing them, at the moment of observing the hindrances, they are already gone. They last, maybe a fraction of a second.

The presentation is based on the Theravāda doctrinal premise that mindfulness is invariably wholesome, which in this respect differs from the early Buddhist construct of mindfulness (Anālayo 2017). Since a wholesome quality cannot exist together with an unwholesome one in the same state of mind, it follows that mindfulness and a hindrance or unwholesome thought can only occur at different times and never together in the same moment of mental experience. This doctrinal position has been articulated by Olendski (2011, p. 64) in the following manner:

in the case where someone who is angry is able to bring attention to the anger, and then further is able to bring mindfulness to the anger, then the anger has become a mental object, an echo

from the preceding mind moments, and is no longer functioning as the attitude driving the mind. One cannot be angry and mindful at the same moment, so at whatever point true mindfulness arises the actual anger is already banished and it is only a relic of that angry state that is acting as the object of consciousness.

From this viewpoint, the role of attention is to notice the presence of something unwholesome; since attention is ethically neutral and always present, it can perform this function. Once such initial attention leads over to mindfulness, however, for that to happen the unwholesome quality in the mind has to disappear. As a result, mindful recognition of a defilement in the mind comes to be envisaged as a rapid alternation between defiled mental moments and mental moments in which mindfulness is present, retrospectively knowing that just a fraction of time earlier a defilement was present. In this way, the doctrine of momentariness can be accommodated, and the memory nuance of mindfulness receives increasing emphasis.

With these modes of adjusting to the demands of the theory of momentariness in Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda exegetical traditions, the memory nuance of mindfulness became increasingly prominent. Such understandings often influence contemporary discussions of the relationship of mindfulness to memory.

Yet, already in pre-Buddhist times derivatives of the term *smṛti* were not confined to a recall of the past but could also convey the sense of attending to what takes place in the present moment (Klaus 1993). This is a prominent implication of mindfulness in its early Buddhist usage, where the instructions for the four establishments of mindfulness or else for mindfulness of breathing require attending to what happens in the present moment (Anālayo 2019b, d). At this time in the history of Buddhist

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thought, the “present moment” still had considerable temporal breadth, rather than being confined to an infinitesimally brief fraction of time (Anālayo 2020d). For this reason, it was still able to accommodate the immediate past and the impending future within the purview of what is presently taking place.

In this setting, well before the coming into vogue of the doctrine of momentariness, there was no need to accord to mindfulness the responsibility to enable memory as such nor was it necessary to conceive of the recognition of the presence of a defilement in the mind as something invariably retrospective. The memory nuance of the early Buddhist construct of mindfulness could therefore simply stand for a quality of keeping in mind, which can relate to the present just as to the past. Such keeping in mind in turn points to a potential of mindfulness in enhancing memory (Anālayo 2020c). In other words, when being mindful now, it will be easier to recall later what happened.

Attention, since it is always present, will of course also be present when something is done absentmindedly and thereby in such a way that it is quickly forgotten. Doing a particular chore in autopilot mode necessarily involves attention (of the superficial type), yet, even just minutes later one might feel uncertain whether one has really done it, because of having executed it in a

distracted way. In contrast, if the same chore is done with mindfulness established, this will prevent switching to autopilot mode. As a result, afterwards one will know that one has done the chore and there will be no need to go and check. This reflects the most fundamental difference between attention and mindfulness in early Buddhist thought, where the former is invariably present in any state of mind, whereas the latter needs to be established.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares he has no conflict of interest.

### Abbreviations

AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Ps, *Papañcasūdanī*; SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*.

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