

## **How Mindfulness Came to Plunge into its Objects**

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### **Abstract:**

The present article explores a notion of mindfulness found in Theravāda insight meditation. This notion appears to have been influenced by a re-interpretation or misunderstanding of a particular Pāli term. The term in question, employed as a synonym for mindfulness, came to be seen as conveying the idea that mindfulness plunges into its objects. This particular understanding was influential in the revival of insight meditation that originated in early twentieth-century Myanmar (Burma).

### **Key words:**

Abhidhamma; Abhidharma; *apilāpanatā*; Attention; Early Buddhism; Focusing; Insight Meditation; Mahāsi Tradition; Mindfulness; *vipassanā*

### **Introduction**

Buddhist constructs of mindfulness reflect different historical periods and doctrinal developments and hence can vary considerably. In what follows I trace one such development in the Theravāda tradition, which led to conceiving mindfulness as a quality that plunges into its object. Such a notion is not evident in descriptions of mindfulness in early Buddhist texts.

### **Right Mindfulness in Early Buddhism**

An investigation of the notion of mindfulness in early Buddhist discourses naturally turns to the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels (Anālayo 2003, 2013, and 2019). These describe the type of practice that brings into being “right mindfulness” as the seventh factor in the noble eightfold path. In early Buddhist thought, this noble eightfold path provides the overarching framework for progress to liberation.

Perusal of the relevant instructions reveals that, even when the mind is under the influence of a defilement like sensual lust or anger, the third *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* of contemplation of the mind enjoins mindful recognition rather than active measures to overcome the defilement. The instructions are simply that one should know when the mind is with sensual lust or without it, or else with anger or without it. Nothing further is said about what one should do to emerge from the detrimental condition of a mind in which sensual lust or anger are present.

Given the pervasive ethical concern in the early Buddhist discourses in general and the recurring emphasis in these texts on the need to overcome any unwholesome condition of the mind, such as sensual lust or anger, this is remarkable. For mindfulness to perform its proper function, it was apparently considered important that non-interfering observation had its proper place before the required action is taken.

Needless to say, active measures should of course be taken. In fact, at times just mindful recognition of a defilement can suffice for it to go into abeyance. Should this not be the case, however, an actual endeavor to overcome an unwholesome mental condition is the domain of right effort, the sixth factor of the noble eightfold path. In the context of this path, right effort and right mindfulness collaborate, but their individual contributions toward progress on the path differ.

The difference between these two factors and their distinct contributions to the cultivation of the noble eightfold path can be explored with the help of the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* and its parallels extant in Chinese and Tibetan. The parallel versions describe how right effort and right mindfulness relate to the cultivation of other path factors, such as right action, right speech and right livelihood. Taking the case of right action as an example, its implementation stands in contrast to wrong action, which comprises killing, theft, and sexual misconduct. The description of how right effort and right mindfulness

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collaborate to bring about an emergence from wrong action proceeds as follows:

One makes an effort to abandon wrong action and to set up right action; this is one's right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong action and mindfully one dwells setting up right action; this is one's right mindfulness.

(MN 117: *so micchākammantassa pahānāya vāyamati sammākammantassa upasampadāya, svāssa hoti sammāvāyāmo. so sato micchākammantaṃ pajahati sato sammākammantaṃ upasampajja viharati, sāssa hoti sammāsati*).

One endeavors to train with the wish to abandon wrong action and to accomplish right action; this is reckoned right effort. By way of being mindful a monastic abandons wrong action and accomplishes right action; this is reckoned right mindfulness.

(MĀ 189: 求學欲斷邪業成就正業, 是謂正方便. 比丘以念斷於邪業成就正業, 是謂正念).

Making an effort to abandon wrong action and to establish right action is right effort. Being mindful one abandons wrong action and cultivates right action; this is one's right mindfulness.

(Up 6080: *log pa'i las kyi mtha' spong ba'i phyir 'bad par byed cing, yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha nye bar bsgrub pa'i phyir yang dag pa'i rtsol ba byed la. de dran pa dang ldan bzhin du log pa'i las kyi mtha' spong zhing, yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha' sgom par byed pa 'di ni 'di'i yang dag pa'i dran pa ste*).

Even in the face killing, or stealing, or sexual misconduct, the task of mindfulness remains one of monitoring. These three wrong actions involve serious breaches of the basic conduct expected from a Buddhist lay disciple (let alone monastics), who take unto themselves the observance of five precepts. Three of these precepts require precisely abstaining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The actual endeavor to keep these precepts is the domain of right effort, for which mindfulness can provide the required information. But mindfulness itself monitors; it does not intervene actively.

The contrast between right mindfulness and active endeavor that emerges in this way could be illustrated with a simile from the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel (MN 19 and MĀ 102). The simile describes a cowherd in two different situations. In the first situation, the cowherd has to watch closely over the cows and at times even hit them in order to prevent them from straying into the ripe fields. Once the crop has been harvested, however, such active intervention is no longer required and the cowherd can just watch them in an uninvolved manner. In their description of this second situation, the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel employ the term *sati*/念. In the case of the Chinese version, the terminology is to some degree open to different interpretations, as 念 can render either “mindfulness” or “thought.” Given that the otherwise closely similar Pāli passage has *sati*, however, it seems fair to conclude that the same sense of “mindfulness” also holds for the Chinese parallel. In this way, the description of a relaxed and uninvolved observation can be related to mindfulness, which stands in contrast to the earlier situation of active intervention, a situation that could in turn be taken to illustrate right effort.

In sum, the material from the early Buddhist discourses surveyed above conveys an impression of mindfulness as a quality that stands back and observes. Such observation or monitoring can continue while active measures are taken; in fact the versatile quality of mindfulness can collaborate with a range of other mental factors and qualities. But even when making a strong effort to emerge from seriously unwholesome activities like killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct, mindfulness does not get actively involved. Instead, its main function appears to be a continuous and uninvolved monitoring of what is taking place that furnishes information required for the proper deployment of right effort.

### **Abhidharma Exegesis**

As a background to exploring the emergence in the Theravāda tradition of a different construct of mindfulness with a considerably more active nuance, I first need to survey aspects of Abhidharma exegesis, in particular a tendency to define a particular term by listing synonyms. This tendency has a precedent in the early discourses in the repetition of similar words to convey a particular meaning. As a feature of oral literature (Gray 1971), such repetition serves to ensure that the audience keeps what has been said well in mind. It also ensures that a particular meaning is presented through different facets that complement each other and thereby drive home the central message. Gombrich (2018, p. 56) illustrated the effect created by such strings of similar terms with a feature of Western classical music:

There may be a succession of chords, each of which repeats all the notes of the previous chord except one, for which it substitutes a new note. When we hear the whole sequence of chords,

our mind has a different appreciation of each of them from what it would get if each chord were just heard in isolation. The effect of hearing all of them in close sequence conveys something richer and more complex than if we heard them separately.

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A comparable effect results from strings of closely similar terms employed in the early discourses, particularly when the text is presented orally. The same is less evident when merely reading it. The almost musical auditory dimension of such a string of terms of similar meaning often takes the form of a rhythmic sequential arrangement. Words with fewer syllables are followed by words with the same number or more syllables. This pattern has been called the “principle of waxing syllables.” Here are two examples taken from the Pāli discourses for the sake of illustration:

Fear: *bhīto*, *saṃviggo*, *lomahaṭṭhajāto*. These three terms, expressing basically the same meaning of “fear”, are arranged according to the principle of waxing syllables, namely two, three, and then six syllables.

Old: *jiṇṇo*, *vuddho*, *mahallako*, *addhagato*, *vayo-anupatto*. In this case, five terms are used to express the same meaning of being “old”, adopting a sequence of two, two, four, four, and six syllables.

The effect of the employment of this principle of waxing syllables becomes more easily evident if the terms are read out aloud. It conveniently illustrates the chief purpose of such strings of similar terms in the early discourses, which is to aid memory.

With the coming into existence of Abhidharma exegesis, definitions of key terms tended to assemble as many synonyms or closely-related terms as possible in order to catalogue the range of meanings of a particular term. With this type of usage, concerns gradually shift from facilitating oral retention to creating precise definitions as building blocks for constructing a comprehensive system of thought.

### A Loss of Mindfulness

In the case of constructing a definition of mindfulness, a search among the discourses for synonyms to be used for such purposes would naturally have led to a passage in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. No parallel to this discourse is known, so the development discussed here is relevant to the Theravāda tradition in particular.

The *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage in question describes someone who has memorized the teachings of the Buddha. Passing away with a loss of mindfulness, this person is reborn in a celestial realm. The import of the ensuing description appears to be that celestials in that realm recite some part of the teachings of the Buddha in the presence of the person recently reborn there. Although the mindfulness of the one just reborn in that celestial realm had been slow in arising, once it does arise the teachings are quickly remembered. The discourse speaks in this context of the one who was reborn as quickly “reaching distinction.” The relevant passage reads as follows:

Someone passes away with a loss of mindfulness and is reborn among a certain group of celestials. There the happy [celestials] recite passages of the Dharma to [that being]. Monastics, the arising of mindfulness is slow, yet the being quickly reaches distinction. (AN 4.191: *so muṭṭhassati kālaṃ kurumāno aññataraṃ devanikāyaṃ uppajjati. tassa tattha sukhino* *<dhammapadāpilapanti>. dandho, bhikkhave, satuppādo, atha so satto khippaṃ yeva visesagāmī hoti*).

The Pāli text given above has been emended following the commentary (Mp III 170), as the Pāli editions differ in relation to the key term *apilapanti*. Bodhi (2012, p. 1714 n. 904) adopted the same reading, found in the Ceylonese edition, explaining: “I construe *dhammapadāpilapanti* as a sandhi formed from *dhammapadā* and *apilapanti*.” Norman (1988, p. 51) similarly commented on the passage: “I think we have [here] the verb *api-lapanti*.”

For the different editions of this discourse to exhibit some variations regarding the term *apilapanti* is not surprising, given the rare occurrence of this term. For subsequent developments in the Theravāda exegesis, such variations are in fact less important than the reading found in the commentary. It is this reading which would have influenced the understanding of this passage in later tradition.

The basic idea conveyed by the *Ānguttara-nikāya* passage seems to be that the recital of the teachings by the other celestials led the one recently reborn there to recover the lost memories. Cone (2001, p. 174) explained that the corresponding noun *apilāpana* then conveys the sense of “enumerating; reminding or remembering by reciting or enumerating.”

### **Mindfulness in the *Vibhaṅga***

The *Vibhaṅga*, an early text in the Theravāda Abhidharma collection, surveys the four establishments of mindfulness from two perspectives, one according to the method of the discourses and the other according to the Abhidharma method. Its presentation according to the method of the discourses seems to reflect an early stage in the evolution of descriptions of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation (Bronkhorst 1985).

Following this exposition, the *Vibhaṅga* offers a commentary on key terminology. This part of the work can be taken to be later than the preceding exposition of *satipaṭṭhāna*. For the case of mindfulness, the work provides a list of near synonyms (Vibh 195). One of these is the abstract noun *apilāpanatā*, formed by adding to *apilāpana* the suffix *-tā*

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(which in its general usage conveys the sense of the state or the nature of the term to which it is added).

In the *Vibhaṅga*'s listing, *apilāpanatā* is preceded by two terms, both of which convey the sense of remembrance, namely *saraṇatā* and *dhāraṇatā*. This gives the impression that, when the list was drawn up, *apilāpanatā* was considered a near synonym of these two terms.

A subsequent part of the same *Vibhaṅga* then gives a definition of the term *muṭṭhasacca*, “loss of mindfulness,” by providing again a list of synonyms. In the Pāli language, an *a-* prefixed to a word serves to negate it. Hence in order to turn a particular term into its opposite, one either prefixes an *a-* or else, if the term is already a negative and begins with an *a-*, one drops that. On adopting this procedure, the terms *saraṇatā* and *dhāraṇatā* become *assaraṇatā* and *adhāraṇatā*.

In the case of the term *apilāpanatā*, the same pattern of word formation was applied, with the result that it became divested of the *a-*. The final outcome was therefore the term *pilāpanatā* as one in a list of terms to describe a loss of mindfulness (*Vibh* 360). A problem with this lexical procedure is that *apilāpana* was not originally the result of a combination of *a-* and *pilāpana*, but much rather of *api-* and *lāpana*. In this way, the division of the term in this part of the *Vibhaṅga* (and also in other Abhidharma works of the Theravāda tradition) involves a separation of the term at the wrong place. As a result, *apilāpana* (or the equivalent *apilāpanatā*) is invested with a new meaning. Norman (1988, p. 50) explained that

the initial *a-* was taken to be a negative, and its opposite was created by removing the *a-* ... and the resultant *pilāpanatā* was explained as ‘floating’ ... a distinction is therefore made between *muṭṭhasacca*, which is connected with things floating on the (surface of the) mind, and *sati* which is connected with things not floating, i.e. entering into the mind.

According to Gethin (1992, p. 38 and 40),

*apilāpana* seems to have been misunderstood — or at least reinterpreted — by the Pāli Abhidhamma tradition ... the *Dhammasaṅgani* creates a pair of opposites, *apilāpanatā* and *pilāpanatā*, which are used to explain *sati* and *muṭṭha-sati* (‘lost mindfulness’) respectively. Now *apilāpanatā* would seem to mean ‘not floating [on the object of the mind]’ and *pilāpanatā* ‘floating [on the object of the mind]’. This, at least, is evidently how the commentarial Abhidhamma tradition took the terms ... It seems that because the commentaries fail to recognize *api-lapati* (= *abhi-lapati*), they therefore make use of a rather different image: *sati* is the mental quality that submerges itself in the objects of the mind; when there is no *sati* the mind floats or drifts on the objects of the mind.

Independent of whether this is an error or an intentional reinterpretation, the net result is an understanding of mindfulness that differs considerably from the early Buddhist discourse passages surveyed earlier. Instead of being a receptive monitoring quality that does not interfere, mindfulness comes to be seen as much more active, to the extent of “plunging” into its object. The resultant understanding of mindfulness in turn had considerable impact on insight meditation as taught in the contemporary Theravāda tradition.

### **Mindfulness and Insight Meditation**

The widely-taught practice of insight meditation, *vipassanā*, largely owes its origins to the teaching activities of the scholar-monk Ledi Sayādaw in Myanmar (Burma) during the period of the British colonization. In order to fortify local Buddhists against the destabilizing effects of foreign rule and the loss of the protection that the local government had earlier afforded

Buddhism, Ledi Sayādaw took the step of teaching Abhidharma to laity (Braun 2013). According to a traditional prediction, the decline of Buddhism will be heralded by a disappearance of the Abhidharma (Mp I 88 and Endo 2004). Hence an attempt to prevent such a decline naturally focused on the preservation of Abhidharma teachings. Alongside encouraging the formation of Abhidharma study groups, Ledi Sayādaw also taught insight meditation as a means to facilitate a direct and personal experience of these Abhidharma teachings. The type of meditation taught was meant to lead to an experience of the ultimate realities listed in a popular handbook of Abhidharma, the perhaps tenth-century “Compendium of Abhidharma”, *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* (Bodhi 1993).

In such a setting, the construct of mindfulness found in later exegesis naturally had a strong influence. Based on the understanding of *apilāpanatā* as a combination of *a-* and *pilāpanatā*, mindfulness was conceived as a quality that plunges into its objects. The influence of this idea can be seen, for example, in the explanation offered by the *vipassanā* teacher U Sīlananda (1990, p. 21) on the role of mindfulness in insight meditation taught in the tradition of Mahāsi Sayādaw:

Mindfulness is something like a stone hitting a wall. In order to throw a stone, you must put out energy. You throw the stone with energy and it hits the wall. Like the stone hitting the wall, mindfulness hits the object. Whatever the objects are — the breath, or the movements of the abdomen, or the activities of the body — your mind, as it were, goes to the objects. That hitting of the object is mindfulness.

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The description shows the degree to which the making of a strong effort has become an intrinsic quality of mindfulness. Another teacher of the same *vipassanā* tradition, U Paṇḍita (1992/1993, p. 99), reasons:

‘Mindfulness’ must be dynamic and confrontative. In retreats, I teach that mindfulness should leap forward onto the object ... if we throw a cork into a stream, it simply bobs up and down on the surface, floating downstream with the current. If we throw a stone instead, it will immediately sink to the very bed of the stream. So, too, mindfulness ensures that the mind will sink deeply into the object and not slip superficially past it.

This definition complements the one quoted earlier. In the present case, the element of a strong focus is particularly evident. This is what enables a deep sinking into the object and thereby avoids any superficiality.

From an early Buddhist perspective, the resultant understanding of *sati* could be considered a somewhat specific application of mindfulness when it occurs in conjunction with other qualities, in particular a strong focus and considerable effort. This particular notion of mindfulness came to be a central influence on insight meditation traditions that spread from Myanmar (Burma) to other parts of the world and in turn on how mindfulness came to be understood in some circles in the West.

Pointing out such developments is not meant to imply that only the type of mindfulness described in early Buddhism is correct and differing conceptions of this quality are wrong. Mindfulness is such a versatile and multi-dimensional quality that the existence of different definitions that take up specific aspects of this quality are hardly surprising. Moreover, insight meditation traditions based on the idea of mindfulness as a quality that plunges into its objects have been remarkably successful and have changed the lives of many for the better. The above exploration is therefore only meant to show a historical development that led to a certain understanding of mindfulness, in order to clarify that this is not the only way of conceptualizing *sati*. The type of mindfulness cultivated in *vipassanā* meditation practice that follows the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition can be understood to occur invariably in combination with considerable effort and focus, in order to plunge into its objects. Although a valid approach, this is clearly not the only possible way of cultivating mindfulness in insight meditation.

In sum, mindfulness in early Buddhist discourse appears to be a receptive and non-interfering quality. Due to a misunderstanding or a re-interpretation of a particular Pāli term, in the course of time a different notion of mindfulness as plunging into its objects arose, which had considerable influence on the nascent revival of insight meditation and in turn on understandings of mindfulness in its current usage. From the viewpoint of current research on mindfulness, it would be helpful to distinguish clearly the different constructs of mindfulness in existence, each of which has its particular value and potential, in order to adjust research accordingly.

### 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*; MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama*; MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Mp, *Manorathapūraṇī*; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*; Vibh, *Vibhaṅga*; < >, emendation.

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