

How did mindfulness become “bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness”?

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“Mindfulness” in modern discourse – whether among meditation teachers or clinicians – is defined in various ways, but generally circle around “bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness.” Nonetheless, although mindfulness (in Pali, *sati*) is one of the most fundamental concepts in the Early Buddhist Texts (EBT), one would be hard-pressed to find a definition or description of mindfulness there that remotely resembles such circulations. In this essay I will try to account for our modern definitions of mindfulness and how they might be reconciled with the EBT.

My intention is not to delegitimize these modern definitions; words come to be used differently with time and, hey, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet!” The modern definitions have clearly proved useful and resonate with modern meditative and clinical experience. My intention is to explore what the shift in the meaning of mindfulness tells us about the shift from early Buddhist concerns to modern concerns as we pursue “mindfulness,” and then to ask the important question, What might we have left behind?

Modern definitions of mindfulness

The benefits attributed to mindfulness in modern literature range

broadly. They encompass therapy, such as stress reduction, improved memory, creativity and productivity, less emotional reactivity and better relationships. Many are spiritual, such as greater insight into the human condition and the nature of reality. Generally mindfulness is described as promoting happiness and well-being, a kind of going along with the flow of life.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines mindfulness as,

“The practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.”

Meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein defines it as,

“Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn’t more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it.”

Professor of medicine and innovator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as,

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

The great Sri Lankan-American monk and scholar Bhante Gunaratana writes,

"Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for Sati is 'bare attention'."¹

Broadly speaking, we can identify four qualities that recurrently

1 Gunaratana (2002, 140).

appear in such definitions:

- **Heightened awareness.** This awareness, attention or consciousness is described as very alert and receptive. Descriptors applied are: intense, active, curious, vigilant and watchful, paying attention, but also calm, open, with balance and equanimity, choiceless, lucid and spacious. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes mindfulness as a kind of “mental pose.”² Generally implicit is that it is a state sustained over extended periods of time.
- **Present moment awareness.** This is variously described as meeting each moment as it presents itself, or as opening to and receiving the present moment just as it is, as not thinking about past and future, or simply as being present.
- **Bare awareness.** This is sometimes described as wordless or without interpretation, as seeing things as they are. Sometimes bare awareness is assumed to be non-conceptual or intuitive.³
- **Non-judgmental awareness.** This is variously described as acceptance, as without criticism, as without reactivity, as without labeling “good” or “bad,” or as being compassionate with oneself.

It should be noticed that the modern definitions of mindfulness are generally framed in terms of sustained states or qualities of mind, independent of the specific practices that produce these results. That is, mindfulness is not something we do, but rather it

2 Bodhi (2011, 26).

3 Gunaratana (2002, 138) calls mindfulness a “fleeting instance of pure awareness before conceptualization.”

is a kind of mental condition that might result from something we do, from application of a technique.

Mindfulness in early Buddhism

In 2006, two great American scholar-practitioners B. Alan Wallace and Bhikkhu Bodhi, began a correspondence which began with Wallace posing the following question about *sati*, the ancient Pali word for mindfulness:⁴

“As you well know, in the current *Vīpassanā* tradition as it has been widely propagated in the West, *sati* is more or less defined as “bare attention,” or the moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises in the present moment. There is no doubt that the cultivation of such mindfulness is very helpful, but, strangely enough, I have found no evidence in traditional Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan sources to support this definition of *sati* (*smṛti*, *dranpa*).”

In fact, the word *sati* means, quite literally in Pali, 'memory' or 'recollection'. Wallace goes on to point to such a definition provided a number of times by the Buddha:

And what is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple is recollective, possessing utmost recollection and discernment, recalling and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of *sati*. (SN 48.9, similarly at MN 53 i 356, etc.)

In a companion essay⁵ I take this definition very seriously and

4 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

5 Cintita (2018), which was spun off of the current essay when I failed to write the section “Mindfulness in early Buddhism” as concisely as hoped.

show how it almost entirely accounts for the use of *sati* in the EBT. I will summarize this account very briefly here.⁶

Sati means 'recollection' but is used in the EBT particularly as recollection of the *Dhamma*. Because the *Dhamma* functions primarily to undergird practice, recollection is most typically *situated*, that is, it is evoked as it bears on particular practice situations. This entails being *recollective*, that is, having the teaching at our fingertips that is relevant to the current situation, and having *discernment*, that is, evaluating the current situation in terms of that teaching to guide behavior or understanding. *Sati* is thereby largely equivalent to *dhamma-cariya*, conduct in accordance with the *Dhamma*, or, more literally, moving about in the *Dhamma*. From another perspective, we can say that *sati* is what turns Buddhist theory into practice as it is borne in mind moment by moment.

Mindfulness thereby involves keeping in mind throughout our practice day such things as our trust and appreciation of the triple gem, our vows, precepts, conditions for guarding the senses, standards for evaluating what is wholesome and unwholesome, social responsibilities, conditions for making merit, values, worldview, and knowledge useful in interpreting phenomenal experience.⁷ It reminds monks not to tiptoe or walk on their heels

6 Thanissaro (2012, 9-14) describes mindfulness in the EBT in similar terms.

7 I should point out that our recollection of the *Dhamma* is more than a reflection of hearing or reading the *Dhamma*. It also evolves through our practice as we ponder on the *Dhamma*, verify the *Dhamma* in our own experience, bring the *Dhamma* it into our meditation, internalize the *Dhamma* and habituate our conduct and understanding according to the *Dhamma*. Our situated recollection may become so habituated that it becomes more intuitive than conceptual, much like the habituation of any skill. See Cintita (2018).

in a householders home,⁸ a participant in an altercation that the anger of one's interlocutor hurts him more than it hurts oneself, the bug-infested not to assault living beings and the introspector that there is suffering in this craving.

When brought into meditation, we find *sati* in a dual role:

- ***sati's regulatory function.*** *Sati* keeps in mind what we are supposed to be doing, it regulates our behavior. It serves this function in right speech and right action, for instance, in following precepts. It also keeps in mind the *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions.
- ***sati's framing function.*** *Sati* keeps in mind our knowledge of the *Dhamma*, particularly right view, as we examine and interpret our experiential world.

The *satipaṭṭhāna* (literally, attendance of recollection, but aka foundations of mindfulness), involves both the regulatory and framing functions of the situated recollection of Dhamma. The overall practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a task of *observation* (*anupassanā*) that begins by picking a theme within one of four categories (body, feeling, mind and general phenomena) for observation. For instance, we might take craving as a theme. Observation typically proceeds by coordinating two processes:

- clear comprehension (*sampajañña*). This examines and interprets the direct experience of craving as it arises in the present situation.
- *sati*. This recalls and bears in mind what is known about craving, for instance, its relationship to feeling and to

8 This really is one of the 227 monks' rules, this one intended to preserve the dignity of the Saṅgha.

suffering. This is *sati* in its framing role.

Additional factors are mentioned in the *satipaṭṭhāna*:

- ardency.
- observing “body in body,” “feeling in feeling,” etc.
- “putting aside covetousness and dejection with regard to the world.”

This array of factors, broadly speaking, extends even to the arising of *samādhi*, intimately interrelated to the *satipaṭṭhāna*.⁹

Sati here is explicitly mentioned in its framing role as a support for examination of phenomena, but it is also implicitly present in its regulatory role, holding all of the involved factors together. However, since mindfulness in its regulator role is present in all practice, what puts *sati* in the word *satipaṭṭhāna* must be this distinguished framing role. *Sati* here might be described as the portal through which our meditation is infused with right view, ultimately to be internalized so that we learn to see with the eyes of the Buddha.

So, *sati* is recollection. This would be well and good, but the Buddha also equates right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), the penultimate factor of the noble eightfold path, with the *satipaṭṭhāna* as a whole:

9 Be aware that the Theravada school historically introduced a strict dichotomy between “*vipassanā*” and “*samatha*” meditations, unfounded in the EBT. Accordingly, the meanings of *samādhi* and *jhāna* shifted so that they were no longer compatible with *satipaṭṭhāna*. This shift might obscure the validity of this statement made here about *samādhi* in the EBT for some readers. See Cintita (2017, 192-199) and Shankman (2008) for more on this.

And what, bhikkhus, is right mindfulness? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwells observing the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, recollective, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells observing feelings in feelings, ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena ... This is right recollection.
(SN 45.8)

In short, *sati* serves as the name for one particular factor, framing recollection of the Dhamma, within a larger configuration of factors. I will call this *sati* or recollection *per se*. But it also serves as the name of the entire configuration of factors present in *satipaṭṭhāna*. This opens up the scope of the word mindfulness to take on the qualities of the various factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, not just of *sati* *per se*.¹⁰ This, I maintain, justifies, at least to some degree, the modern definitions of mindfulness.

How modern definitions reflect satipaṭṭhāna

Notice that mindfulness (either *sati* or *satipaṭṭhāna*) is something that we do in the EBT; it is an active process. This is in contrast to modern definitions, in which mindfulness is a relatively passive, receptive sustained state of awareness. Many of the qualities attributed to *sati* in modern descriptions, in fact, seem to apply not to *sati* *per se*, but to other factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* complex. Let's try to locate the four qualities that recur in modern definitions in terms of the complex of factors found in *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Heightened awareness. We mentioned that this quality

¹⁰ This kind of extension of the meaning of a word from part to whole is known as synecdoche.

comprehends alertness, intensity, activity, curiosity, vigilance and watchfulness and attention. These are qualities that arise in *satipaṭṭhāna*, but are best attributed to clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), not to mindfulness per se. We also mentioned that this quality is a kind of “mental pose” that comprehends receptivity, calm, openness, balance, equanimity, choiceless awareness, lucidity and spaciousness. These are also not qualities of *sati* per se, but of concentration (*samādhi*) or *jhāna*. This is a state that arises immediately dependent on *satipaṭṭhāna*, largely through suppression of distractions or hindrances, and that we train ourselves to sustain over long periods of time.¹¹

Present moment awareness. There are significant exceptions to this quality within the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. For instance, within the charnal ground contemplations there is an exercise in imagining oneself as a *future* corpse. Moreover, a number of practices involve visualizations rather than attendance to what the present moment presents, such as recollection of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha* (*Buddhānussati*, etc.), kindness (*mettā*) contemplation or even contemplation of parts of the body in *satipaṭṭhāna* that cannot be directly discerned in the moment.

Nevertheless, most *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises are indeed observations of the arising and disappearance phenomena as they are experienced, and in this sense involve awareness of the present moment. Recall that *sati* per se is generally situated recollection that tracks the process of clear comprehension of whatever is being observed. Moreover, mindfulness its regulatory function

11 Indeed, modern mindfulness might just as well be identified with *samādhi* as with *sati*. The reason this has not happened is likely the strict dichotomy between “*vipassanā*” and “*samatha*” meditations in the later Theravada school mentioned in an earlier footnote, which entails that *samādhi* cannot arise in *satipaṭṭhāna*.

requires attending choices as they present themselves.

Bare awareness. Recall that this is sometimes described as wordless or without interpretation, as seeing things as they are, sometimes as non-conceptual or intuitive.¹² This quality seems also to have exceptions. *Sati* per se is specifically discriminating in EBT as it is used to interpret or regulate present circumstances in terms of *Dhamma*. As Bodhi (2011, 26) points out, *sati* guarantees correct practice of other path factors. This makes problematic the notion of *sati* as devoid of discrimination or evaluation.¹³

Nonetheless, the various factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* do tend toward a stripped down conceptual content: The task of observation is constrained by its theme. We are asked to observe the body in the body, etc., which entails control of excess elaboration. Moreover, as we remove covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world, distractions are subdued. Furthermore, with the arising of the *jhānas* the mind is brought to a very quiet state. It is even possible that, with the habituation and internalization of the themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* / *samādhi*, conceptual content might give way to a more intuitive “feel” for the themes.¹⁴

Non-judgmental awareness. Bhikkhu Bodhi recounts attending a *vipassanā* retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre,

12 The phrase “bare attention” to refer to mindfulness is due to the great German monk Nyanaponika Thera. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011, 29), who was Nyanaponika's student for many years states that bare awareness was never intended to define mindfulness overall, just highlight initial phase of *satipaṭṭhāna*, yet became quite influential.

13 Curiously, Gunaratana (2002, 190) writes specifically of mindfulness, “It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory.”

14 See Cintita (2018, 18-27) and references there for more on this.

Massachusetts as young monk after having lived for a number of years in Sri Lanka. He recalls being alarmed that a sign in corridor read, “Allow Whatever Arises.”¹⁵ One of the primary functions of *sati* per se in the EBT is to put what is observed in relation to values, to recognize what is skillful, blameless, pure or refined, and what is unskillful, blamable, impure or inferior, according to ethical standards, and in fact the amoral implications of neglecting ethical judgment are a recurrent criticism of modern mindfulness.¹⁶

It might therefore seem that the quality of non-judgmental awareness – entailing acceptance, lack of criticism or reactivity, refraining from labeling “good” or “bad” and compassion toward oneself – has been created out of whole cloth. However, what we can say in its defense is that in the *satipaṭṭhāna* or in modern mindfulness practice we do become less reactive than we might otherwise be, as we observe what is pure or defiled with relative detachment. This follows from the heightened awareness and *samādhi* we develop in these practices.

In summary, the recurrent qualities of modern mindfulness can be mapped, somewhat roughly, onto various factors within the *satipaṭṭhāna* complex. What is perhaps most troubling in the modern definitions is that one factor, in particular, plays remarkably little role in this mapping: *sati* per se. I will attempt to show that this can be traced back to the neglect of right view and ethics among the concerns of modern mindfulness practice. Consequently, there is very little left of mindfulness in mindfulness.

15 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

16 Sharf (2014, 943-944).

The origin of the modern definitions

The modern definitions arose in the twentieth century as the West, as I will suggest, imported an incomplete Buddhism from the East, typically weakening and often stripping entirely right view, as well as the system of ethics and virtue that forms the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Meditation became, to varying degrees, a stand-alone practice more easily exportable to the West, disassociated from its traditional context. With the neglect of right view, the role of *sati* in *satipaṭṭhāna* as the portal through which right view enters into our meditation came to be misunderstood.

Four meditation techniques seem to have been particularly influential in the formation of Buddhism in the West. It is significant that all of them seem to have already achieved a degree of portability in Asia as attempts at popularization. These are general Chan/Zen meditation, the Sambōkyōdan Zen tradition from Japan, Goenka-style *vipassanā* and Mahāsi-style *vipassanā*. Berkeley scholar Robert Sharf has studied the effects of popularization movements in Buddhism, particularly with respect to meditation practices in East Asia,¹⁷ and points out that the overall tendency of any such popularization movements seems to be the promotion of one particular aspect of the broad array of integrated practices and understandings above and sometimes to the exclusion of all others. It is easy to see why this might be so, given the vast breadth and depth of the Dhamma and the limited time available to most adherents for Buddhist practice.

Non-meditation movements. Outside of meditation, are *nembutsu*, the devotional chanting of the name of Amitabha Buddha common in East Asia, and the devotional recitation, study

¹⁷ Sharf (2014, 2018, etc.).

and display of the Lotus Sutra in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism might be cited. This promotion of a single practice is often accompanied by the claim of completeness, that all other practices are unnecessary or ineffective for spiritual attainment. This encourages the dislodging of the practice from its traditional context and making it easily portable to new cultural and religious contexts.

General Chan/Zen. In the eighth century, Sharf reports, Buddhist masters in the Chinese capitol popularized meditation practice, in response to the demand of lay devotees, by making it simple and accessible to those without doctrinal training nor ascetic lifestyle and by promising quick results. This became the meditation (*Chan/Zen*) school, in which meditation became a matter of setting aside distinctions and conceptualizations, and letting mind rest in the flow of here and now. The almost exclusive focus on meditation is foundational, probably not so much for the actual practice of Zen historically, but certainly for the way Zen views itself. In any case, the neglect of doctrinal training found its way into, and is to this day very much part of, the American Soto Zen experience.¹⁸

Sambōkyōdan. Sambōkyōdan Zen is a twentieth century largely lay popularization movement begun in Japan and that focused single-mindedly on meditation in the form of koan introspection.¹⁹ It considered virtually all other practices, even monastic practice, to be ineffective, but promised quick results to its adherents in terms of *kensho*, awakening experiences. It achieved little success in Japan, where it was widely disparaged, but achieved a great following abroad, where even many Christian clergypeople have

18 This is an assessment based on the author's personal experience.

19 Sharf (2018).

become authorized Sambōkyōdan masters.

***Vipassanā* movement.** The modern *vipassanā* movement began as part of a very broad movement that began before 1900 to revitalize Buddhism in Burma, largely driven by the threat to Buddhism by British colonization, involving renewed commitment to ethics and virtue, to *Dhamma* study and to meditation. By and large, the ethical and doctrinal foundations of meditation have been broadly upheld in Burma as prerequisites of meditation practice. For instance, meditation master Mohnyin Sayadaw required learning *Abhidhamma* before learning undertaking meditation,²⁰ and Mogok Sayadaw required extensive study of dependent co-arising before undertaking meditation practice.²¹ Of interest to us are the meditation schools that found success in non-Buddhist lands, particularly the schools promoted by S.N. Goenka and Mahāsī Sayadaw.

Goenka method. U Ba Khin was one of few non-monastic meditation teachers, a government minister quite engaged in lay life. He promoted a rigid meditation schedule and 10-day meditation retreats, downplayed study and aspired to spread his method throughout world independent of any particular religious context. His student S.N. Goenka further minimized the role of doctrine, and declared meditation itself to be the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. He, after moving to non-Buddhist India (his ancestral home), achieved spectacularly his teacher's wish to internationalize *vipassanā* meditation, making it very self-contained and portable.²²

Mahāsī method. The monk Mahāsī Sayadaw was a prominent

20 Braun (2013, 156).

21 *Ibid.* (160).

22 *Ibid.* (157-160).

scholar-monk in Burma before he took up serious meditation practice and developing and teaching his own technique. He would have begun his own practice steeped in doctrine as well as virtue, and indeed the importance of right view and ethics is stressed in his teachings. Yet he appears to have developed the expedient of making spare reference to doctrine at least in the introductory stages of his method,²³ in contrast to some of his peers in Burma. In this way, his technique could be taken up quite readily by anyone at any stage of practice in Burma, and would be easily exported to foreign lands.²⁴ He also made use of the intensive retreat format and, like many popularizes, claimed that one could acquire advanced stages of the path in very short time.²⁵

In the West. In coming to the West, Buddhist meditation was entering a rather unusual religious culture, one that had undergone a “subjective turn,” in which greater attention was given to personal experience and away from institutions and external authority.²⁶ It asked that one “find one’s authentic voice, one’s own inner truth.”²⁷ Moreover, “spirituality” was being increasingly commodified, a kind of spiritual marketplace arising in a pluralistic context in which free agents need no longer accept the authority of family traditions. The term “spirituality” itself, as in, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” apparently came into vogue in the 1950’s with the rise of the consumerist lifestyle,²⁸ with

23 Braun (2013, 161), Sharf (2014, 952).

24 Sharf (2014, 942).

25 *Ibid.* (944).

26 McMahan (2008, 58, 188).

27 *Ibid.* (189). The essence of Buddhism became an inner experience (McMahan, 2008, 42-43).

28 Carrette and King (2004, 42, 128). It is also argued there that this led to a substantial corporate take-over of the cultural space of spirituality by the 1980’s, probably beginning with the way Christmas is celebrated, some

decidedly mix-and-match, plug-and-play, build-your-own tendencies.

It is therefore not surprising that meditation methods that were modular, led quickly to intense personal experiences and did not appeal to the outer truth of another (the *Dhamma*) would have great appeal in this religious environment. For instance, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, who would have an enormous influence on American *vipassanā*, founded the Insight Meditation Society in the mid-1970's, after each has spent much time in Asia, studying with Mahasi and Goenka, among others. Their vision was of bare practice with almost no rituals nor non-meditation activities. For them, authority came from practice itself, the Sangha was a lay community and meditation was the heart of Buddha's teachings.²⁹ Western Zen has followed a similar, but at the same time distinct path. It also tends to diminish ethics and right view,³⁰ yet is typically slathered in ritual, apparently through the insistence of Japanese Zen masters active in the West.³¹

Although this seems to have been a founding principle, interest and implementation of a wider scope of Buddhist teachings has nonetheless tended to develop over time, I should also note that the scope of western scholarship is growing steadily and many

decades earlier.

29 Braun (2013, 163) .

30 DT Suzuki, who had a profound influence on the development of American Zen, insisted that the enlightened person transcends social conventions and prescribed morality (McMahan, 2008, 133).

31 This might rightly be called “cultural baggage,” for during my first sesshin many years ago I can testify to experiencing a week of intense silent culture shock. In the subsequent years I become quite comfortable with these ritual forms and appreciated them as a training in mindfulness, that is, in recalling what the heck it was I was supposed to do next.

meditation teachers have become quite knowledgeable in Dhamma. Many western teachers, particularly monks and nuns, advocate a much broader, integrated and holistic view of Buddhism.³²

In the West mindfulness has also in places become further abstracted from anything like its Buddhist context, most noticeably in clinical applications like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and in corporations and other organizations, including the military. “Business savy consultants pushing mindfulness training promise that it will improve work efficiency, reduce absenteeism, and enhance the 'soft skills' that are crucial to career success.”³³

The main point here is that the modern environment and concerns in meditation practice are generally different than they had been in early Buddhism and in most existing traditions – which demand a tight integration of meditation with ethics and right view – and that this shift in concerns are reflected in a shift in the technical vocabulary of meditation. *Sati* per se had lost its doctrinal presupposition. A similar dangling presupposition undoubtedly effected the meaning of *Saṅgha* in the modern context, which in Asia refers to the monastic community (and sometimes adepts, whether lay or monastic). If you can practice meditation without leaving home, why be concerned about monks and nuns? If you can practice meditation on the basis of a simple technique, why be concerned about ethics and doctrine? The modern definitions of mindfulness serve those modern concerns

32 This is one of the primary purposes of my book *Buddhist Life/Buddhist Path* (Cintita, 2017), to provide an introduction to Buddhism that reflects this holistic view.

33 Purser and Loy (2013).

adequately, but the shift is symptomatic of something lost that it might help to be aware of.

Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view, right intention, only being present, and that Dhamma is often regarded as “clap-trap,” “mumbo-jumbo,” while meditation is “unconstrained by dogma.” Meanwhile, Alan Wallace is concerned that *vipassanā* had become a radically simplified teaching for the general lay public, “dumbed down” and overlooking richness of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.³⁴

Nonetheless, the shift in vocabulary does not itself keep us locked into a deficient understanding of meditation: there are knowledgeable modern teachers – and I believe their numbers are increasing – who seem to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* as it was intended, but who accept a modern definition of mindfulness and simply bring in recollection of right view into the process of observation implicitly, through the back door, apparently unaware that the *sati* in *satipaṭṭhāna* was originally the front door, explicitly held open for right view to enter.

Final thoughts

The teachings of the Buddha are radical. They are radical ethically. They are radical psychologically. They are radical socially. They are meant to upturn our lives, to challenge prevailing norms, to challenge human nature as normally understood. Their goal is to turn away from the ancient twisted patterns of thought and behavior that have kept us locked in suffering for untold eons, and to trigger a radical restructuring of our cognitive faculties and driving impulses. The Buddha even

34 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

instituted an enduring counterculture within the Buddhist community that embodies his radical message and gave it the social status effectively to challenge the norms and notions under which most of the rest of community lives.³⁵ This is the Buddhism that produces awakening.

Modern definitions of mindfulness are appropriate to less far-reaching concerns. Instead of moving about in the *Dhamma* we are asked to cultivate a certain state of mind with scant reference to the *Dhamma*. Harvesting some part of the Buddha's teachings is fine if the product is put to good use. I might suggest the Buddha's teaching on kindness (*mettā*) or social harmony would be more useful than that on mindfulness, and it would leave fewer dangling presuppositions. Nonetheless, Buddhist meditation techniques do provide the experience and immediate gratification that many seek in the modern spiritual marketplace.³⁶

I agree with the assertion that “the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough.”³⁷ My hope has been for many years that the radicalism of Buddhism would be an exception to that. Sharf worries that the ethical perspective of modern mindfulness, in spite of its root in a critique of mainstream values and social norms, nonetheless resembles mainstream consumer culture, requiring, for instance, no change in how we live our lives.³⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi fears, “Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize

35 Imagine what would have happened if bohemians, beatniks, and hippies had been endowed with the social respectability of the *Saṅgha*.

36 Sharf in various writings is quite critical of the almost unprecedented obsession with attainment of experiences rather than of skills through Buddhist practice.

37 Carrette and King (2004, 4).

38 Sharf (2015, 478).

the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism.”³⁹

I worry about the integrity of Buddhism as a whole, when a single practice is elevated and identified with all of Buddhism or as the heart of Buddhism. Calling meditation or mindfulness the heart of Buddhism is like calling the roof the heart of the house. It is true that the roof serves the highest purpose of the house – protection from rain, sleet and snow –, but the roof itself depends on so much that is underneath it, where most of the work in building the house and subsequently most of the life within the house takes place.

I worry that, after a honeymoon period of mindfulness in that house, it is common for single-minded practitioners to make little further developmental progress and then either to give up meditation practice, or to develop an increasing and more desperate obsession with mindfulness in the hopes of some breakthrough. Such practitioners have failed to attend to the virtue and the right view, and, before that, refuge and renunciation, upon which right mindfulness and right concentration rest.

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³⁹ Quoted by Purser and Loy (2013).

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