

What is Mindfulness?

By Peter B. Williams

The Paradox of the Term Mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the unique contributions of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha taught it to alleviate suffering and liberate the heart. While mindfulness taught in the secular context can have real benefit, it is not necessarily taught as a vehicle for liberation. If you want that, then you want to make sure you are practicing mindfulness (Pali: *sati*) as taught by the Buddha. Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace elaborates:

In common usage the English term mindfulness simply means to be aware, or heedful. *Sati* has a much richer connotation, so those wishing to practice Buddhist meditation are well advised to gain as clear an understanding of this and other related terms as they can, based on the most authoritative sources they can find. Otherwise, Buddhist meditation quickly devolves into a vague kind of “be here now” mentality, in which the extraordinary depth and richness of Buddhist meditative traditions are lost (Wallace 2008).

What is tricky is that the Buddha’s words on mindfulness do not correspond to most current understandings of the practice. The few times the Buddha defines the word he refers to long-term memory:

And what, bhikkhus, is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, bhikkhus, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and discretion, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. He dwells contemplating the body in the body...feelings in feelings...mind in mind... phenomena in phenomena (*Samyutta Nikaya* V, 48[9], p. 1671).

The last sentence is a familiar description of the four establishments of mindfulness. Before that it is notable that the Buddha uses remembering the “long ago” past to denote a practice that is currently understood to be a practice of present moment awareness. For instance, Joseph Goldstein, one of the founding teachers of Theravada Buddhism in the United States, writes, “Mindfulness . . . means being aware of what is happening in the present moment” (Goldstein, 1976, p. 13). Sri Lankan monk Bhante Gunaratana writes, “When you first become aware of something, there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before conceptualize the thing, before you identify it...That flowing, soft-focused moment of pure awareness is mindfulness (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 138).

If mindfulness is a form of awareness, then translating *sati* as memory is a false equivalence because one can remember events without being aware one is remembering, says Theravada scholar Anālayo Bhikkhu (Anālayo 2017).

A central early Buddhist text in the Pali Canon, the *Abhidhamma*, skirts these contradictions by using *sati* as “remembering” in service of awareness:

The word *sati* derives from a root meaning “to remember,” but as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past. It has the characteristic of not wobbling, i.e. not floating away from the object. Its function is absence of confusion or non-forgetfulness. (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha* II, 5, p. 86).

In essence, mindfulness is remembering to pay attention to the present. Western Thai Forest Tradition monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu agrees, emphasizing the “not wobbling” characteristic:

You can be attentive to something for only a very short period of time and then you have to remind yourself, moment after moment, to return to it if you want to keep on being attentive. In other words, continuous attention—the type that can observe things over time—has to be stitched together from short intervals. This is what mindfulness is for. It keeps the object of your attention and the purpose of your attention in mind. (Thanissaro 2008).

Both these understandings, one from early Buddhism and one from a contemporary monastic, support the idea that mindfulness is associated with present moment awareness. They include the notion that there is a persistent quality to the remembering.

But these ideas do not square with the Buddha’s description of mindfulness being a memory of “what was done and said long ago.” Two scholars say that the way out of this dilemma is the idea that present moment awareness is a support for memory.

“It seems to me that a preferable way of conceptualizing the relationship between mindfulness and memory, evident in early Buddhist discourse, would be in the sense that mindfulness strengthens and enhances memory, as the presence of mindfulness makes it easier to remember. Such an approach avoids proposing in some way an equivalence between mindfulness and memory, which is clearly problematic. At the same time it allows for the two to be closely related to each other (Anālayo 2017).

Theravada Buddhist scholar Bikkhu Bodhi echoes Anālayo’s thoughts, writing, “Keen attentiveness to the present forms the basis for an accurate memory of the past.” (*Majjhima Nikaya* note 560, p.1252)

We are trying to reconcile an oddity in the meaning of mindfulness. While the practice of it in current Buddhist traditions is as a form present moment awareness, the most ancient definitions of the word *sati* involves memory. Whether we think of mindfulness as remembering to be aware or as something that supports the ability to remember at a later time, it is still notable that it takes such semantic somersaults to fit the word *sati* into awareness practice.

Some scholars point out that, in fact, it is folly to think there can be a single definition of mindfulness in the vast Buddhist literature and in a tradition with 2500 years of practice.

Understandings of mindfulness, and even more so of its practice in the various Buddhist meditation traditions, are best based on clearly acknowledging that there is a plurality of conceptions of mindfulness...the theoretical construct of mindfulness and the practices informed by this notion have gone through considerable development during nearly 2,500 years in the history of Buddhist thought, making it practically impossible to speak of “Buddhist mindfulness” as if this were a monolithic concept (Anālayo 2017).

Rather than forcing a single definition of mindfulness, one must, instead, define it in terms of the context in which it is being used (Anālayo 2017).

The context of this essay is that of mindfulness practice in service of wisdom, letting go, and liberation. Since all interpretations, ancient or modern, of *sati* as remembering attempt to fit it into the practice of present moment awareness, it seems simpler to me to just conceive of it as a way of being aware. This accords with most modern definitions and avoids the semantic twists I describe above. We can proceed with a sense of mindfulness as awareness with confidence, knowing we are informed by the historical terrain of the term *sati*.

I will use Theravada scholar Andrew Olendzki’s definition of mindfulness as a form of consciousness that is endowed with special qualities (Olendzki 2016). The rest of the essay explores the qualities that make mindfulness such a special way of paying attention.

To begin, there are some key elements of mindfulness practice that need to be defined and differentiated (Pali in parentheses):

Consciousness (*Viññana*) - The act of knowing a physical or mental sense experience.

Attention (*Manasikara*) - The act of focusing consciousness on something.

Concentration (*Samadhi*) - The continuity of consciousness over time.

We can clarify the terms with an analogy of a flashlight. Consciousness is the illumination, or light of the flashlight, attention is where one points the light and concentration is how long the light stays on. When consciousness is endowed with the right qualities to be considered mindfulness we can substitute mindfulness for consciousness in the analogy and the above definitions.

Meditators often confuse concentration and attention, thinking that one has to be one-pointed (attention on one object) to be concentrated. In fact, in a common style of practice called choiceless awareness one can be quite concentrated as attention moves from object to object, with a continuity of consciousness over time.

Mindfulness and concentration work together to deepen practice. Mindfulness is a momentary act of consciousness. Its penetrating power comes from the flashlight being able to stay on longer. The longer the illumination lasts, the more we can look around and see how things really are. In meditation practice it is not so much mindfulness that deepens, but concentration.

On the other hand, we can be quite attentive and concentrated without being mindful. For instance, when fully absorbed in a movie or playing a sport, there can be strong consciousness, concentration and attention, but not necessarily much mindfulness. Animals can be very conscious and present, but not mindful, according to the Buddhist tradition. To understand this better, we need to understand the qualities inherent in mindfulness.

Qualities of Mindfulness

Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendzki, says that mindfulness is a “special non-ordinary” way of paying attention or being conscious (Olendzki 2016). Below are the most important qualities. To aid with memory, I use what words that start with an “n” sound as much as possible.

1. *Knowing (consciousness)* - The simple knowing of a physical or mental sense experience. This is an essential but not sufficient quality of mindfulness.
2. *Nowness* - The knowing is directed at a present moment experience. However, people often equate being present with being mindful, which is not accurate. Being present, like consciousness, is a necessary but not sufficient quality of mindfulness.
3. *Intentional* - We are cultivating consciousness on purpose.
4. *Non-conceptual* - The knowing aspect of mindfulness is directed at sensory experience apart from our ideas or concepts about it. This a profound distinction for most people starting a mindfulness practice. Because our thoughts so readily intrude on sensory experience and because thoughts create so much of our difficulty, it can feel like a huge relief to know experience apart from concept. The less we are

beleaguered by our thoughts - the home of time, stress, and a sense of being separate - the more we relax and learn how to rest in presence, being and belonging. Becoming familiar with the non-conceptual aspect of mindfulness feels like a revolution in the psyche.

As with the above factors, non-conceptual knowing, often called bare attention, is necessary but not sufficient for mindfulness. To focus only on bare attention is to miss the full import of mindfulness:

The cultivation of bare attention is valuable in many ways, and there's a rapidly growing body of research on its benefits for both psychological and physiological disorders. But it's incorrect to equate that with mindfulness, and an even greater error to think that's all there is to *vipassana*. If that were the case, all the Buddha's teachings on ethics, *samadhi* (highly focused attention), and wisdom would be irrelevant. All too often, people who assume that bare attention is all there is to meditation reject the rest of Buddhism as clap-trap and mumbo-jumbo. The essential teachings are dismissed rather than one's own preconceptions (Wallace 2008).

5. *Non-judgmental, accepting* - You cannot know something and judge it at the same time. When you judge something your mind about it is made up and you are no longer connected to it. Thus, necessarily, mindfulness is non-judging and accepting.

Our judging of and aversion to our experience can be subtle. For example, we might take up mindfulness of a difficult state, be it sadness or fear, with the idea that if we stay mindful it will eventually go away. This is a subtle aversion and resistance to the state. Mindfulness involves opening completely to something, so fully that, as Theravada teacher Joseph Goldstein says, "it can stay here forever." Have you ever opened that fully to a difficult state of mind? Only then are you truly practicing mindfulness.

6. *Non-identification* - This is one of the most important qualities of mindfulness. When we know something mindfully we understand it is not us, but is just a part of our experience. For instance, we can have a passing consciousness that we are thinking about something but still be completely lost in the thoughts. We can be so lost that we don't realize we are not in the actual experience that we are thinking about. We mistake our thoughts for reality, much like being in a dream. Mindfulness is consciousness strong enough to notice that a thought is its own reality and is not the same as what we are thinking about. With non-identification, we could say that mindfulness is a quantitative difference in consciousness that leads to a huge qualitative difference. Being disidentified with thoughts relieves any affliction they cause and gives us choice on whether to act on them. From here we can rebuild our lives enacting thoughts that seem wholesome and letting go of those that do not.

7. *Meta-awareness* - Mindfulness has built into it the self-reflexive quality of knowing that knowing is happening. When you are mindful of something you know you are

being mindful of it. If there is any doubt that you are mindful then you are probably not.

8. *Wholesome motivation* - Wholesome states are those that lead to well-being for oneself and others, while unwholesome states lead to harm. The *Abhidhamma*, or Buddhist psychology, posits that unwholesome and wholesome cannot arise together, says Olendzki (2016). Mindfulness is a wholesome, or skillful, mind event and therefore the motivation for it must also be a wholesome state of mind.

When mindfulness is equated with bare attention, it can easily lead to the misconception that the cultivation of mindfulness has nothing to do with ethics or with the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and the attenuation of unwholesome states. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Pali *Abhidhamma*, where mindfulness is listed as a wholesome mental factor, it is not depicted as bare attention, but as a mental factor that clearly distinguishes wholesome from unwholesome mental states and behavior. And it is used to support wholesome states and counteract unwholesome states (Wallace 2008).

One can practice many elements of mindfulness but if there is not an ethical dimension to the consciousness it cannot be considered mindfulness. For instance, in a conversation I had with a veteran who was a sniper, he believed he had been trained in meditation because the act of stalking his target and waiting for the right moment to shoot them involved so many of the above elements - consciousness of the present moment, intentionality and bare attention. However, in such intense times it is unlikely the consciousness involves non-identification and it is very clear that paying attention in order to kill someone is a violation of Buddhist ethics. Clearly, mindfulness is more than going to the “attentional fitness gym,” a marketing slogan I have recently seen applied to mindfulness.

Mindfulness is such a refined way of being conscious that eighteen wholesome factors co-arise with it, including self-respect, respect for others, faith, tranquility, and equanimity (Olendzki 2016). It is clear that such qualities could not coexist with the mental disturbance of a harmful intention.

9. *Intelligence* - Theravada teacher Guy Armstrong says mindfulness contains the intelligence to know what we are experiencing, for example, “This is an in breath, this is a sound...this is the hindrance of sense desire... It is the opening of wisdom because there is intelligence in that understanding” (Armstrong 2008). The Buddhist tradition holds that animals do not have this type of intelligence. For instance, a black lab is caught up in eating, running, and chasing things without the ability to stand back from the experiences, says Armstrong.

This intelligence is a form of conceptualizing that is central to the Buddha’s mindfulness instructions in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. The instructions in the *sutta* require being mindful of conceptual sets such as the four physical elements, the five aggregates, the four noble truths and so forth. This conceptualizing is not based on

deluded or elaborate story telling, but, rather, on simple, clear constructs. The Pali word for this quality is *sampajanya* or clear comprehension.

10. *Gateway to wisdom* - The mindfulness of the Buddha is not just paying attention for attention's sake, but for the sake of liberation from suffering. Joseph Goldstein writes that "for mindfulness to function as a factor of awakening it has to be a springboard for investigation. When mindfulness brings us face-to-face with the object, what do we learn?" (Goldstein 2013). We mindfully investigate our experience, using our intelligence in the service of wisdom, to learn clearly what is conducive to awakening or suffering. Wisdom discriminates these differences and enables us to use our precious time and life force to build a life that leads to liberation and away from confusion and delusion.

Mindfulness in Practice

While one can make the simple statement that mindfulness is consciousness with special qualities, the number of qualities mean that a simple definition of mindfulness is not possible. For example, a popular definition comes from the mindfulness-based stress reduction approach: "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally" (Zinn 2017). This identifies many key qualities but is not complete. If we want to practice the Buddha's mindfulness, all the above distinctions are important in knowing what kind of consciousness to direct our efforts towards.

This said, many factors are clear and are likely already engaged in our mindfulness practice - knowing, nowness, intentionality and intelligence. Of the remaining factors the most important ones are non-conceptuality, non-identification, and skillful motivation. Focus more consciously on these three elements and you will more likely be practicing the Buddha's mindfulness.

Regarding motivation, it is important to notice if any of the three root unskillful states of greed, aversion and delusion are driving our meditation practice. For instance, if one is striving excessively to become concentrated this is a form of greed. If one wants to focus exclusively on the breath so that they can avoid any difficult states this is a form of aversion. Delusion as a motivation might arise when we doubt our ability to be mindful of a difficult experience. It is also important to notice skillful motivations for practice - generosity, kindness, interest, enthusiasm, etc. Such motivations are free of ego and are the best guide for practice, free of ulterior motive, interested in being mindful for its own sake. Lastly, the most important wholesome motive for practice is the aspiration to be liberated and free of suffering. This is a motivation which can be overlooked in the secular mindfulness context.

While mindfulness is a special process, it is clear that anything close to it is still quite helpful. For example, even though the bare attention and concentrative

absorption of activities like rock climbing or playing music are not sufficient for mindfulness, these activities relieve us of the stress of creating past or future and can bring great joy. And it is easy to build on these qualities to bring mindfulness into these activities. Even the scent of mindfulness is helpful and when we practice earnestly and with a generous and kind motivation, mindfulness will surely follow as a form of grace.

Yes, But Is It Mindfulness?

We can put our knowledge into practice in scenarios that reflect some of the common misunderstandings of mindfulness. Each example engages some of the above qualities of mindfulness, while missing others. Can you identify which?

A. Spend some time observing an animal in your life. It is clear they are conscious, attentive and very present.

B. A person is totally present watching a movie. They are really engaged with the story line and not thinking about past or future.

C. A person is engaged in a task. It's absorbing them fully. Senses are sharp. They are very present. They are aware of their body, of what they hear and see. There are very few thoughts. They might even be in the zone.

D. A person is meditating and practicing bare attention, aware of sounds and sensations in a pure way, with little intrusion of thoughts about them. They are very concentrated.

E. A person is meditating. They are aware of their breath and their body, of sounds and thoughts. Fear arises. They open to it and feel it in the body and are not swept away by the thoughts. They remember mind states are impermanent and tell themselves that if they stay mindful of the fear it will eventually go away.

Missing factors:

A. Nos. 4 - 10. Animals are not mindful and not capable of wisdom, says Buddhism.

B. Nos. 4 - 7, 10. Maybe nos. 8 and 9. Being present is not sufficient for mindfulness.

C. Probably Nos. 6, 8 and 10. This could describe a sniper.

D. Probably Nos. 6, 8 and 10. Bare attention may not involve an ethical frame.

E. Nos. 8 and 10. The motivation is based on aversion.

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