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A popular misconception

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In this critical article, mindfulness as understood in contemporary psychological dialogue and mindfulness in Buddhism are distinguished. Mindfulness is distinct from awareness and from consciousness, these latter not being factors of enlightenment. Their role in Buddhist faith and practice is explained. The this-worldly, hedonistic, here-and-now spirit of our times is contrasted with the transcendental, renunciant, eternity-oriented perspective of Buddhism. Such a spiritual refuge, once established, does not require ceaseless awareness or endless consciousness. The idea of dwelling in the here-and-now is examined and put in context. The value of the there-and-then, the unconscious, and longer-term perspectives is also reasserted.

Keywords: mindfulness; here-and-now; Buddhism; consciousness

The mindfulness phenomenon

Recently there has been a great deal of attention in the West to something called 'mindfulness'. There are now thousands of books and articles on this subject, and a very large number of practitioners of the art. Mindfulness, as currently understood in the West, is a way of paying attention to and seeing clearly whatever is happening as it is happening. It is suggested that it now provides us with a scientifically researched approach to cultivating clarity, insight and relief from anxiety, depression and a variety of other common psychological ills. It is a form of deliberate non-judgemental attention, in the present moment, that has benefits in terms of enhanced personal effectiveness and having an easier life.

We all know that mindfulness derives from Buddhism. It is the first of what are called the Seven Factors of Awakening. So is this what people think that Buddhism is about? If so, then they are surely misinformed. I wish here to suggest that this contemporary popular 'mindfulness' is a considerable distance removed from the mindfulness that was taught by Buddha as one of the factors of spiritual awakening, and I will look at what this transformation tells us about the manner in which Buddhism is being modified by modernity.

In an effort to present an edited version of Buddhism, Western commentators have certain favoured texts. One of these is the *Satipatthana Sutta*. The *Satipatthana* is about mindfulness. We know this because it has the word *sati*, which is the Pali for mindfulness, in the title. *Patthana* from *upatthana* means 'having close at hand'. Commonly, the title is rendered 'The Setting Up of Mindfulness', which gives the whole thing an air of being a technical manual. One can immediately see how this

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plays into the Western preference. The title could, however, be rendered as 'Having Mindfulness Always at Hand'.

The early part of this text includes many references to awareness and attention, such as 'When reaching out his arm he is aware that he is reaching out his arm', 'When taking a long breath he is aware that this is a long breath', and so on. This has led many readers to believe that mindfulness is awareness, and that these statements are exercises for developing it. If this were correct, then the import of the text would be that there is a skill to be developed and this is how you do it. The skill in question would be some kind of attention, or awareness, or enhanced consciousness. Undoubtedly, many people now think that developing such a skill and maintaining it for the longest possible periods is what Buddhism is all about. This idea is now so widespread that it is increasingly assumed to be true. However, this is a mistaken idea of what was meant by mindfulness in the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. A more careful reading reveals that the beginning of the text includes the passage:

> Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his lags crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2005, p. 145)

It is clear from this that the text is not about how to set up mindfulness, for it starts with mindfulness already established. What the text is saying is that, in the context of mindfulness already at hand, the bhikkhu practises awareness. Mindfulness and awareness are not the same thing. The first point is that one's mindfulness be close at hand. With this established, one uses awareness to examine various aspects of mind and body. The aim is not to cultivate awareness but to use it. What for?

Awareness is a kind of vigilance. The first awareness that is practised is of bodily functions. Why do we need to be wary of bodily functions? Because it is tempting to see the body as oneself. However, if one keeps one's mindfulness, which is to say one's faith, close at hand while observing the body, one will be able to see the 'fundamental nature of what is arising' (*samudayadhamma*), and one will then not be taken in by it. Rather, one will see that the body is just a body. It arises and it passes away. It is not oneself.

What is the spiritual significance of this? Mindfulness is not awareness; mindfulness is 'keeping in mind'. It is a form of memory. What does a bhikkhu (or any Buddhist) keep in mind? He keeps in mind the Buddha and the Dharma, which are a true and permanent refuge. They are true and permanent because they are metaphysical and so not subject to decay in the way that physical things are. What is the purpose of keeping this true refuge in mind while contemplating the body? It is to realize that the body is not a true refuge.

The text goes on in a similar way to show that feelings are not a true refuge and mind is not a true refuge. The bhikkhu realizes that they are not true refuges by observing that they arise and fall away. Similar practice and logic is found in many other Buddhist texts. For somebody who has no refuge beyond what is physical, the direct perception of impermanence could be too terrifying to contemplate, so it is only possible to do this fully if one has another refuge that is beyond the

physical already established. The true refuge does not pass away. Thus, mindfulness empowers awareness, and awareness thus consolidates mindfulness. Mindfulness, here, refers to correct faith, i.e. to what is worth keeping in mind. Right faith is consolidated by paying attention to the unsatisfactory nature of wrong faith. Those who do not keep the Buddha and the Dharma in mind fail to do so because they rely upon their own bodies, feelings and minds instead. They have faith in things that are impermanent, unreliable and prone to provoke affliction.

Mindfulness is not attention, and it is not a skill. It is keeping the Dharma in mind and not being taken in by the notion that body, mind and feelings constitute a refuge. Here I mean, of course, mindfulness in Buddhism as in the text. In modern mindfulness practice, mindfulness has come to mean awareness, or even full consciousness, and it is definitely a skill. This is, however, not even the original meaning of the term 'mindfulness' in English. When my mother told me to be mindful of my manners, she was not saying anything about awareness, or living in the present moment; in fact, she was warning me against being too much in the present moment. 'Be mindful of your manners' meant: remember them. Don't be so carried away by things of the present moment that you forget more important things. My mother's usage of the term was much closer to that of Buddha than what has become of it in the present vogue for enhanced present-state attention.

Enhanced present-state attention is clearly something that fits well with the value system of a hedonistic culture where immediate self-gratification is held as an ideal, but this is not Buddhism.

Attentiveness is not a goal in itself. Being aware 24/7 would not constitute any kind of salvation; in fact, it would be exhausting. Attentiveness is a phenomenon that arises in the course of learning something, or acting in circumstances when things are uncertain. In a healthy person it arises appropriately, and falls away again when not needed. Awareness is essentially about vigilance. It is related to wariness. The Buddha wants us to be wary of the things that might corrupt us, and he wants us to use our attentive awareness to find out things that, once known by such experience and investigation, will continue to inform our attitude to life, both consciously and unconsciously.

Awareness, or vigilance, has a place in Buddhism. Buddha wants us to learn things, including various forms of self-restraint, and in the course of such learning we need to be attentive. Buddha wants us to investigate. He wants us to find out for ourselves that some things are impermanent and some are not. In the course of such investigation, awareness is necessary. However, once the lesson is learnt, the attentiveness is no longer so necessary because the lesson has become part of oneself. It becomes something that one is mindful of at the appropriate time.

We can see this function of awareness in the learning of any skill. If you have learnt to drive a car you will know that there was a phase during which you were acutely attentive to every bodily movement. This was because your feet were not accustomed to moving the brake and clutch at the same time while your hand moved to the gear lever and your eyes to the rear-view mirror. However, once you had learnt to drive, you no longer had to think consciously about these things. Having changed gear thousands of times it became second nature. You could do it while your brain was engaged in a complex conversation with the person sitting next to

you. The awareness that had been vital at an earlier stage was no longer needed because the lesson had been learnt. You do not learn to drive in order to live in a state of awareness; you practise some awareness in order to learn to drive. Awareness, as a state of attention, is not a goal in itself.

Finally, in the last major section of the text, the bhikkhu contemplates the fundamentals of Buddha's teaching, considering the things that are to be remembered in relation to what he can observe happening in himself. This last section, which is clearly the culmination of the text, is concerned wholly with investigating the Buddha's teachings. These are not physical objects. They are not physical things observed in the here-and-now. They are enduring principles of life and meaning, things that it is good to be mindful of. In the course of the text, the practitioner has progressed from studying the material aspects of life and finding them unsatisfactory refuges, to considering the metaphysical ones. He sees that these fundamentals are, indeed, just the fundamentals of our situation.

The overall purpose of the text, therefore, is not to establish a skill called mindfulness synonymous with awareness, but to use awareness to deepen the practitioner's understanding of, and faith in, the things that, as a Buddhist, he is to be mindful of. It is not about learning a skill; it is about grounding one's faith through discarding alternatives. This is not a personal effectiveness programme (though it might have some spin-off of that kind). It is about deepening faith through spiritual exercises.

Buddha mindfulness

We can also say, incidentally, that Buddhism is not about becoming more and more conscious. When something has been learnt and internalized, it does not remain in consciousness all the time. Mindfulness is not continuous consciousness. The things that the mind is full of, if they are well integrated, present themselves to consciousness as and when it is appropriate for them to do so. A person who has become truly and deeply compassionate will do many compassionate things without thinking about it. They will have a generous view of other people so ingrained in themselves that it only rarely needs conscious awareness to be active. Rather than being aware of being compassionate, it is more the case that cynical or critical views of others simply do not occur in the first place. The most compassionate person is, very largely, unconsciously so. The same goes for other virtues.

What is the most important thing for a Buddhist to be mindful of? It is Buddha. Furthermore, the person of Buddhist faith is generally primarily mindful of what he or she receives from Buddha. The sense of gratitude is a key foundation of Buddhist faith. The awareness that plays a part in this is awareness of one's own failings, weakness, vulnerable nature and proneness to error. At the core of Buddhist faith is a sense of great gratitude that the Dharma has been given and continues to be given even to (or especially to) ordinary, fallible beings such as ourselves.

This attitude of humility and gratitude is a million miles removed from the attitude of the person who sees Buddhism as a series of techniques for some kind of self-perfection, enhanced self-reliance or personal development. The Buddhist does

not take refuge in self. The religious Buddhist takes refuge in Buddha, and does so because of repeated awareness of the limitedness of ordinary human nature. By turning to Buddha there is the possibility of transcending such limitation by being open to receive the grace of the Dharma.

This practice of being mindful of Buddha, either by simply keeping Buddha in mind, or by some deliberate act such as calling the Buddha's name, is one of the most common practices of ordinary Buddhists in the Far East, much more widespread in the general population than doing formal meditation. This is the way that ordinary Buddhists celebrate their faith in a day-to-day manner and acknowledge one another. Saying *Namo Omito Fo* in China or *Namu Amida Butsu* in Japan or *Namo Adida Phat* in Vietnam constitutes a greeting, a way of wishing one another well, a personal spiritual practice and a way of connecting any act with one's mindfulness of what is most sacred, namely the all-acceptance and saving power of the Sambhogakāya-buddha Amitabha, whose name means 'Measureless Light'.

Amitabha Buddha works in the world and in our lives when we are conscious and when we are not conscious. The aim of Buddhism is not to be in a state of hyper-consciousness all the time, but to have the right attitude so integrated that it is unconsciously present all the time. Even if caught completely off-guard, such a person will respond in a balanced, compassionate manner.

As human beings we are amply provided with unconsciousness. It is a very important part of our lives. The things that have taken real root in us are functioning in our unconscious. We need consciousness to cope with situations where something new is required, situations of learning or of danger. Buddha would have us be conscious of the spiritual dangers in the world, the dangers to our soul, the dangers of corruption represented by greed, hate and delusion, but he would also have us so well tamed that loving, compassionate, wise and joyful responses to the situations that occur in life rise up in us spontaneously. The unconscious has its place.

Faith has a close relationship to the unconscious. Doubt is a kind of wariness. Faith, however, is a condition in which we trust. We trust that what we have taken refuge in will be working in our lives even when we are sound asleep.

The here-and-now fallacy

In the modern definition of mindfulness, one often sees references to living in the here-and-now or being aware in the present moment. This is often associated with increasing satisfaction in one's embodiedness. The Buddha, however, does not praise being in the present moment as something to cherish in itself, and does not understand a person to be identical with their body. When the Buddha speaks of attending to what is present, it is so that one can pass beyond attachment to it and arrive at spiritual liberation. In any case, it is clear that Buddha was not always paying attention to the here-and-now.

The idea that Buddhism is a kind of continuous alertness is confounded by the story in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* to the effect that Buddha was once so deep in meditation that he did not notice a thunderstorm going on around him that was so severe it killed two farmers. If the Buddha could be so unaware of his immediate surroundings while still awake, one can hardly think that being acutely conscious of

the here-and-now is the whole aim. Nor is this treated as a lapse: it is cited to show approvingly how deeply the Buddha enters into trance states in which here-and-now awareness is excluded.

There is a small group of utterances of Buddha that go under the name *Bhaddekaratta*. These are sometimes used as a basis for justification of the idea that Buddhism is about dwelling in the present moment. The term *bhadde-karatte* means 'to have had a good night'. Various translators have wrestled with the meaning of this, but it seems a reasonable conjecture that it is the Buddha's way of advocating that others do what he did. His own spiritual awakening came in the course of a night of reflection. He is saying, 'I had a good night once, now you can have yours'. This text includes the passage:

> Let not a person revive the past
>
> Or on the future build his hopes
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> For the past has been left behind
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> And the future has not yet been reached. (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2005, p. 1039)

One can readily see how this can be and has been used as a manifesto for living in the present, but the point here is that this is not an advocacy of living in the here-and-now as a goal or final state. It is, rather, an advocacy of making a supreme effort at perceiving and understanding what is going on in your life by direct observation. Once you have that understanding and conviction, the job is done. There is a clear implication that this will stand you in good stead beyond your death. Death may interfere with your work, but the work is worth doing, even if you die tomorrow.

The implication is not to live for the present because tomorrow we die. It is that there is a work to do that can stand you in good stead for eternity, and the sooner you set to and do it, the better.

Further on in the same passage, the Buddha says that the ordinary person is defeated by what arises in the present. The nature of this defeat is that such a person regards his body, mind and feelings as himself. As they arise, he identifies with them. By ordinary person, here, he says that he means one who has not been taught, become disciplined in or learned the fundamentals of the spiritual life, and does not pay homage to wise teachers. Such a person lives in the present, and that is his undoing.

Thus, the idea that dwelling in the here-and-now is a form of self-development is the exact opposite of what Buddha teaches. Buddha teaches us to notice what arises so that we can dis-identify from it and not be caught by it. We notice it so that we can realize that *this is not me, this is not mine, this is not myself*, a refrain that is found in the Buddha's second discourse and is repeated in many other passages. The implication is that one's true being transcends the present moment, is not caught in feelings or thoughts, is not one's body. It is unconditional.

It is characteristic of the Buddha's religion that he tells us that we can approach the transcendental liberation through conviction arising from observation of this world. Such observation is not an affirmation of this world. It is what leads us to see the disadvantage of immersion in and attachment to this world. The Buddhist is able to live lightly in this world because he or she is not taken in by it.

Let us consider the idea of dwelling in the here-and-now more concretely. What would it mean to *not* dwell in the here-and-now? Perhaps it might mean to be asleep, yet sleep is good for the body and mind, essential even, and Buddha described himself on occasion as one who sleeps well. Perhaps it might mean to daydream, yet daydreaming is sometimes creative; what would people ever invent or create if they did not let their minds roam over wild possibilities? Perhaps it might mean reminiscence, yet reminiscence is surely part of the richness of life, and even Buddha himself reminisces from time to time. It is only through the recording of Buddha's reminiscences that we know about his night of enlightenment. The Buddha even reminisces about past lives. Perhaps it might mean thinking about things and persons not present. Yet it can hardly be a good thing to forget about one's relative in hospital simply because he is not present where one is at the time. Perhaps it might mean to speculate about imaginary circumstances, yet much of Buddha's own teaching is given by conjuring up hypothetical circumstances and analysing them.

Living in the here-and-now is trivially and inevitably the case: it is not possible to live in any other time. The here-and-now means the time when one is living, so the statement is a tautology. When people advocate living in the here-and-now, they do not mean this simply in a tautological sense. However, if the advocacy of living in the here-and-now means more than this trivial sense, then it must exclude some common aspect of life and, when one reflects on the logical options, all the things that it could exclude are things that at some time or other are useful and valuable in human life.

Why then is such store set by this idea? Presumably because it represents a reductionist formula for life. It seems to offer a pithy formula that will save one from falling into error by excluding many aspects of ordinary life. In situations of great stress, confining one's attention can be useful because it reduces the number of things to worry about. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' is something said by both Buddhist and Christian texts. In general, however, Buddhism is expansive, and shows us how to employ all aspects of life in the service of the Dharma, not how to prune our life down to a fraction of what it was intended to be.

Evidently, there is a condition of being so attached to how things were in the past that one can give no attention or value to what needs doing now. Such a state is an obstacle to constructive living. Equally there is a condition of being in which one is so immersed in an imaginary future that one fails to do what would be necessary even to bring it about, let alone other things that need attention in the present. This, too, is an unfortunate state. However, it is equally true that a person who is so engrossed in the present that he makes no use of past experience and cannot plan a direction for his actions will be similarly handicapped.

More fundamentally, Buddhism is less concerned about the present moment than about eternity. Buddha's primary concern is for the long term, the very long term. In many texts, the Buddha makes predictions of Buddhahood for individuals. Why would he do this if he wanted them not to think about the future? He talks of the long-term effects of good and bad actions. His compassion consists in a deep concern for the long-term welfare of beings. He can see well enough that there are many actions that in the short run lead to some profit, yet in the longer term lead to bad karma and the ruin of character. He does not say of such actions that one

should disregard the long term and just dwell in the here-and-now, forgetting the future. Rather, the motive for much of the teaching that he gives is precisely to warn people of the disadvantages that lie in the future, and not just in the remainder of this life span, but in lives to come extending a vast time into the hereafter. This is a religious vision of the nature and place of persons, who are made by their intentional actions.

The modernist paradigm has no place for other worlds and other lives, and so prefers to emphasize the present since that is all that remains. The Buddha is not averse to advocating those things that are good in the present, but for him this present time is merely a tiny drop in a vast ocean of time. The Buddha's vision encompasses myriad lifetimes and endless cycles of cosmic existence. He teaches in terms that are fundamental to all times and places, and that means that his teaching is one in which the dimension of time passing is an essential element. A person desists from doing something when that person sees the disadvantage of it. Advantage and disadvantage are things that unfold over time.

It is no contradiction that the Buddha says, on the one hand, 'Don't hanker after the past, don't build hopes on the future, make effort today' and, on the other hand, 'Think in the long term, don't be taken in by immediate appearance, don't fall into the trap of attaching to impermanent things, consider what will happen to you when, after death, on the dissolution of the body, you will reappear in some destination, either happy or in a state of deprivation because it is the effort of today that determines that longer-term future'. Such emphasis as there is on the present is in order to learn something for the sake of the future.

The over-emphasis on the here-and-now meets the demand of people who want what Buddhism offers of peace of mind and non-violent lifestyle, yet have no belief in other lives and little concern even for their own more distant future. We live in a hedonistic, this-worldly culture. Of course, one can participate in the Buddhist community without believing the whole of it, but it is unwise to then seek to remake the whole to fit one's own preference. Very few of us actually know what happens after death. Buddhism is clearly predicated on a particular view of the matter. One should not do violence to that view just because it does not suit one to think so. You will find out the truth soon enough.

I remember that while travelling in Japan once I asked a number of people what it was about Buddhism that inspired their faith and I was repeatedly told that it was that Buddhism teaches one to have faith in such a way that one need have no fears about death, that one could, in fact, look forward to dying. It is the time of death that is the one big matter in life, I was told. Reflecting on it, I realize that there is a considerable wisdom in this attitude.

Buddhism is a sane and balanced religion. It has a religious frame which enables one to put things in an infinitely large perspective in terms of the dimension of time, the dimension of space, and the dimensions of spirit that, being metaphysical, transcend time and space. It is this infinity of perspective that enables it to be a sane and balanced middle path that does not run off to extremes. The Buddha does not insist on conformity. He simply points out what the long-terms effects are, and lets us make our own decisions. Thus, there is liberation within a gentle, yet uncompromising wisdom.

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David Brazier is a Buddhist teacher, author and president of the International Zen Therapy Institute. He is also head of the Amida Order, a Pure Land sangha.

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