

Buddhist and Psychological Views of Mindfulness

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The Meaning of Life

- Albert Einstein: “Well-being and happiness never appeared to me as an absolute aim. I am even inclined to compare such moral aims to the ambitions of a pig.”
- HH the Dalai Lama: “I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we all are seeking something better in life.

Two Types of Happiness

- Hedonic pleasure: the pleasure derived from pleasant stimuli and the avoidance of unpleasant stimuli ~ the hunter-gatherer approach
- Authentic wellbeing: the sense of flourishing derived from an ethical way of life, mental balance, and wisdom ~ the cultivator approach

The Buddhist Approach to Authentic Wellbeing

- Ethics ~ social & environmental flourishing
- Mental Balance ~ psychological flourishing
- Wisdom ~ spiritual flourishing

Mindfulness as a Mental Factor

- Asaṅga (4th c. CE): “What is mindfulness? The non-forgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the function of non-distraction.”
(*Abhidharmasamuccaya*, 6.6)
- Śāntideva (685-763): “In brief, this alone is the definition of introspection: the repeated examination of the state of one’s body and mind.” (*Bodhicāryāvatāra* V, 108)
- Caroline Rhys Davids (1843–1922): The Theravada view of mindfulness has “much in common with the Western modern theory of conscience or moral sense [as] an inward mentor, discriminating between good and bad and prompting choice.”
[*A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics: Dhamma-Saṅgaṇi*, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1900), 16]

Authentic Mindfulness

Nāgasena (2nd century BCE):

“Mindfulness, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts...mindfulness, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies.”

[The Milindapañhā: Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena, ed. V. Trenckner (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 37–38]

The Buddhist Context for Authentic Mindfulness

Buddha:

“What is authentic view? It is this knowledge of suffering, knowledge of the origin of suffering, knowledge of the cessation of suffering, knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of suffering — this is called authentic view.

What is authentic intention? The intention of renunciation, intention of goodwill, intention of not harming — this is called authentic intention.”

(Saccavibhanga Sutta: Discourse on The Analysis of the Truths)

Psychological Definition of Mindfulness

“A kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is.”

(Scott R. Bishop, M. Lau, S. Shapiro, et. al., “Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition.” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11:3, Fall 2004)

Strengths and Weaknesses of Mindfulness Meditation

- Mindfulness meditation programs had moderate evidence of improved anxiety, depression, and pain
- Low evidence of improved stress/distress and mental health–related quality of life
- Low evidence of no effect or insufficient evidence of any effect on positive mood, attention, substance use, eating habits, sleep, and weight.
- “We found no evidence that meditation programs were better than any active treatment (i.e., drugs, exercise, and other behavioral therapies).
- “Stronger study designs are needed to determine the effects of meditation programs in improving the positive dimensions of mental health and stress-related behavior.”

(“Meditation Programs for Psychological Stress and Well-being: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” *JAMA Intern Med.* 2014;174(3):357-368. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.13018.)

Side-Effects of Mindfulness: Attrition of Sound Judgment

You are ***not*** practicing mindfulness if you experience any of the following:

- I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions.
- I tend to evaluate whether my perceptions are right or wrong.
- I tell myself that I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling.
- I believe some of my thoughts are abnormal or bad and I shouldn't think that way.
- I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad.
- I tend to make judgments about how worthwhile or worthless my experiences are.
- I tell myself I shouldn't be thinking the way I'm thinking.
- I think some of my emotions are bad or inappropriate and I shouldn't feel them.
- I disapprove of myself when I have irrational ideas.
- Usually when I have distressing thoughts or images, I get angry that this happens to me.
- Usually when I have distressing thoughts or images, I judge myself as good or bad, depending what the thought/image is about.

[Ruth A. Baer, Gregory T. Smith, Jaclyn Hopkins, Jennifer Krietemeyer, and Leslie Toney, "Using Self-Report Assessment Methods to Explore Facets of Mindfulness," *Assessment* 13, no. 1 (March 2006): 27–45.]

Side-Effects of Mindfulness: Attrition of Implicit Learning

In a study presented at the Society for Neuroscience annual meeting in November 2013, it was found that the higher adults scored on a measurement of mindfulness, the worse they performed on tests of implicit learning — the kind that underlies all sorts of acquired skills and habits but that occurs without conscious awareness. In the study, participants were shown a long sequence of items and repeatedly challenged to guess which one would come next. Although supposedly random, it contained a hidden pattern that made some items more likely to appear than others. The more mindful participants were worse at intuiting the correct answers.

(“Dispositional mindfulness is associated with reduced implicit learning,”

C.M. Stillman, A.M. Coffin, J.H. Howard, D.V. Howard:

<http://www.abstractsonline.com/plan/ViewAbstract.aspx?cKey=bdec4e46-89b1-434b-b3bf-eacb33bdbb3a&mID=3236&mKey=8d2a5bec-4825-4cd6-9439-b42bb151d1cf&sKey=2f044d58-fdb9-4f2d-a122-bfafc7e163fa>)

The Capitalist Appropriation of Mindfulness

“The biggest problem with mindfulness is that it is becoming part of the self-help movement—and hence part of the disease that it is supposed to cure. Gurus talk about ‘the competitive advantage of meditation.’ Pupils come to see it as a way to get ahead in life. And the point of the whole exercise is lost. What has parading around in pricey lululemon outfits got to do with the Buddhist ethic of non-attachment to material goods? And what has staring at a computer-generated dot got to do with the ancient art of meditation? Western capitalism seems to be doing rather more to change eastern religion than eastern religion is doing to change Western capitalism.”

[“*The mindfulness business: Western capitalism is looking for inspiration in eastern mysticism,*” Schumpeter

(<http://www.economist.com/news/business/21589841-western-capitalism-looking-inspiration-eastern-mysticism-mindfulness-business>)]

Bare Attention in Theravāda Buddhism

Bhikkhu Bodhi:

“Nyanaponika himself did not regard ‘bare attention’ as capturing the complete significance of satipaṭṭhāna, but as representing only one phase, the initial phase, in the meditative development of right mindfulness. He held that in the proper practice of right mindfulness, sati has to be integrated with sampajañña, clear comprehension, and it is only when these two work together that right mindfulness can fulfill its intended purpose.”

Bare Attention in Tibetan Buddhism

- Lerab Lingpa (1856 – 1926): “Whatever kinds of mental imagery occur—be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature, and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another.”
- Dūdjom Lingpa (1835 – 1904): “I think people who spend their whole life at this and regard it as the best of practices may be fooling themselves by compounding one delusion with another...If I examine those whose lives pass in this way, I see that in the past they have created the causes for spinning around and around in saṃsāra under the influence of dualistic grasping. It seems to me that if they persist in overdoing such meditation, what need is there to say that this will act as a great anchor, further grounding them in saṃsāra?

Conclusions

- The psychological view of mindfulness corresponds to a very basic, initial phase of Buddhist meditation.
- “Mindfulness meditation” has significant benefits, but it is important not to equate it with the essence of Buddhist meditation at large.
- To derive the full benefit of mindfulness in the Buddhist sense, it must be contextualized within the trainings in ethics, mental balance, and wisdom, and be directed toward the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice, whether conceived as liberation from cyclic existence or as the full enlightenment of buddhahood.