

How “mindfulness” got mislabeled

Bhikkhu Cintita, ©2023

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By 1881 the scholar T.W. Rhys Davids had found the optimal translation for the Pali word *sati*. Previous scholars had variously tried translating or defining it as ‘remembrance,’ ‘memory,’ ‘recollection,’ ‘thinking of or upon,’ ‘calling to mind,’ ‘active state of mind,’ ‘fixing the mind strongly upon any subject,’ ‘attention,’ ‘attentiveness,’ ‘thought,’ ‘reflection,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘correct meditation,’ and so on¹ Most of them seem to have understood that the root meaning of the noun *sati* was ‘memory,’ and that the Buddha explicitly defined it that way himself, but were looking for something more descriptive of its specific role in Buddhist practice.

Rhys Davids explained his choice of ‘mindfulness’ with respect to *sammā-sati* ‘right mindfulness’:

Sati is literally 'memory' but is used with reference to the constantly repeated phrase 'mindful and thoughtful' (*sato sampajāno*); and means that activity of mind and constant presence of mind which is one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist.²

On the basis of his later works it's clear that Rhys Davids understood that what the good Buddhist was mindful of were “facts” like impermanence, and “natural law” (*Dhamma*) more widely, much as devout Christians are mindful of the glory of God in everything they do.³

That was then and this is now. Unfortunately the felicitous marriage of *sati* and ‘mindfulness’ did not survive the contingencies of the twentieth century. One

1 Gethin (2011, 264-5).

2 Rhys Davids (1881, 145).

3 Gethin (2011, 264-5).

hundred and twenty-five years later, the Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace emailed the scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi,⁴

As you well know, in the current *Vipassanā* 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*).

It seems that little remained of Rhys Davids’ original intent grounded in the earliest scriptures.

As Wallace alludes, “mindfulness” (I use the double quotes to indicate roughly whatever is commonly understood nowadays under ‘mindfulness’) is a critical point of reference for most Buddhist practitioners, around which we orient ourselves as we navigate our world of practice. It certainly has shaped my practice, for instance. For each of us, it corresponds subjectively and individually to a very real experience that we learn to cultivate, and through which we make progress in our practice. My intention is not to deny the experience, only to point out that it is now mislabeled, and that the modern disconnect between *sati* and “mindfulness” deserves serious examination, especially among scholars and the most advanced practitioners intent on a deep understanding of the *Dhamma* in any of its traditional forms. As I hope to show, “mindfulness” has been shaped by the demands and fashions of modern popular culture, and, even while many productively practice “mindfulness,” the modern terminology has created confusion for those engaged in practice, teaching or scholarly research based on traditional, non-modern sources.

Here, I want to consider in more detail how “mindfulness” is understood in modern Buddhism and contrast that with how *sati* was used as a technical term in the early texts. I then want to trace how this disconnect came about historically, and also how it is that “mindfulness” speaks nonetheless so readily to modern people’s practice experience. I will also suggest an alternative to Rhys Davids’ term ‘mindfulness’ that does not carry the burden of having become a label for something else.

4 The resulting correspondence was subsequently made public as Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

Modern understandings

“Mindfulness” is widely regarded as a form of meditation. 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.

Perhaps the definition most consequential for the modern understanding in general was provided by the German monk Nyanaponika Thera in 1954, apparently initially as a provisional definition for those beginning meditation practice, but widely regarded as definitive:

Mindfulness (*sati*) applies preeminently to the attitude and practice of Bare Attention in a purely receptive state of mind.⁵

The great Sri Lankan-American monk, meditation teacher and scholar Bhante Gunaratana clarifies ‘bare’ as ‘non-conceptual’:

Mindfulness is non-conceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is ‘bare attention.’⁶

Gunaratana also makes explicit that “mindfulness” is *not* about memory:

It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory.⁷

Sylvia Boorstein tells us that,

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.

“Mindfulness” is similarly described as a state of open or choiceless awareness, in that sense simply receptive of present experience without elaboration. Thich Nhat Hanh tells us,

5 Nyanaponika (1954,15).

6 Gunaratana (2011, 140).

7 Gunaratana (2011, 190).

Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognize the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don't have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life.⁸

Jon Kabat-Zinn states:

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.⁹

Early Buddhist understanding

The Pali word *sati* is a derivation of a root meaning 'memory' or 'recollection' and corresponds to the verb *sarati* 'remember' or 'recollect.' It occurs in its adjectival form as one of the factors of what I call "the *satipaṭṭhāna* method,"¹⁰ described in the phrase from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta,

... ardent, comprehending, and *sati*-ful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

The cognate word in Sanskrit *smṛti* has a similar meaning and is commonly used specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself, which for many centuries were preserved in rote memory before they were committed to palm leaf.¹¹

Sati is explicitly described as a form of memory in the earliest texts.¹² *Sati* is the first of the seven awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*), where it is clearly allocated the function of bringing the *Dhamma* to mind so that it can then be examined and investigated by means of the second awakening factor:

... when one has heard the *Dhamma* from such [accomplished] bhikkhus ..., a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of *sati* is aroused by the *bhikkhu* The *bhikkhu* completes the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. Whenever,

8 Thich Nhat Hanh (2010).

9 Kabat-Zinn (2005).

10 See my related paper of that name.

11 Levman (2017).

12 This is also affirmed in key texts of the later tradition as well, such as the *Visuddhismagga* (xiv 141), the *Milindapañhā* (Gethin 2011, 269). Levman (2017) provides many examples.

bhikkhus, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus recollective [*satimā*] discriminates that *dhamma* with wisdom, examines it, makes an investigation of it, on that occasion the awakening factor of investigation of *dhamma* is aroused by the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

Elsewhere the Buddha offers us the following definition of *sati* :

And what is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple is *sati*-ful, possessing utmost *sati* 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, also similarly at MN 53 i 356)

Various examples and similes that the Buddha provides for *sati* involve the skillful performance of some task,¹³ each of which demands attentiveness, but also know-how, bringing the relevant learned background knowledge, standards, perspectives and skills to mind and holding them there. In fact, almost all examples of *sati* in the early *Dhamma* are specifically what in modern psychology would be known as “working memory,” activated by association for quick interpretation of, or response to, present circumstances.¹⁴

For instance, as an example of “*sati* with respect to the body” the Buddha tells us of a man tasked with carrying a bowl of oil filled to the brim past the most beautiful girl of the land, who is dancing and singing before a great crowd, without spilling a drop, lest he lose his head.¹⁵ Then there is the gatekeeper, who is “wise, recollective [*satimā*], and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders.” In either case, it is imperative that one draw on all of one’s learned know-how to accomplish a practical (not contemplative!) task. The Buddha declares that “a noble disciple” is once again like that: “recollective, possessing supreme *sati* and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago.”¹⁶

13 Kuan (2015) provides an overview of such similes.

14 See Dreyfus (2011) on *sati* as working memory. Levman (2017, 125) notes that the cognates in the Prakrits, but not in Sanskrit, connote lucidity of mind. The association with working memory would account for that.

15 SN 47.20.

16 AN 7.67 iv110-1.

Then there is the example of someone walking through a thorny forest without being pricked, a simile in which the thorns represent sensual attractions.¹⁷ This last case exemplifies perhaps the most common type of reference for *sati*, having to do with restraint of the senses, a practice that demands the continuous remembrance of learned *Dhammic* standards throughout the day. Remembering, then living up to, our standards restrains our behavior, and is compared in another simile to binding animals to a post in order to constrain their movements.¹⁸

In my related paper *the satipaṭṭhāna method* I frame Buddhist practice in terms of skilled performance and further clarify the function of *sati* in terms of bringing to mind, and maintaining in mind, aspects of *Dhamma* that are relevant to the fulfillment of the current practice task. These can be anything from conceptual know-how to trained dispositions that guide spontaneous perceptions and actions in accord with *Dhamma*. Recall that Rhys Davids coined ‘mindfulness’ on the basis of two Pali words that commonly co-occur: *sati* and *sampajañña*. *Sampajañña* is the counterpart of *sati* that attends to the details of the current practice situation to arrive at an interpretation in accord with the recollected content of *sati*:

And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: *sati* and *sampajañña*. (AN 10.16 v115)

Accordingly, *sati* is well translated as ‘proficiency’ and *sampajañña* as ‘comprehension.’ Together they form the basis of right proficiency (*sammā-sati*), as originally suggested by Rhys Davids, to support performance in accord with *Dhamma* of every aspect of Buddhist wisdom and ethical practice.¹⁹ Right *sati* thereby works alongside right effort and alongside right view:

Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. ... One tries to abandon wrong action and to enter into right action: This is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong action and to enter and remain in right action: This is one's right proficiency. Thus these three qualities – right view, right effort, and right proficiency – run and circle around right action. (MN 117)

17 SN 35.244 iv189.

18 SN 35.247 iv199-200.

19 See my related paper *the satipaṭṭhāna method*.

This passage is repeated as for ‘action’ for each of ‘view,’ ‘resolve,’ ‘speech’ and ‘livelihood.’ Buddhist practice across the board is thereby performed on the basis of *Dhammic* know-how: standards, values, viewpoints and learned skills, which have been acquired in developing right view internalized thought repeated practice, brought to bear through right *sati*, and energized through right effort. The practice of right proficiency will often give rise spontaneously to right *samādhi* as well, as described in my related paper *the miracle of samādhi*:

For one of right *sati*, right *samādhi* springs up. (SN 5.25-6)

Accordingly, we remember our precepts as we go about our lives, or, after some training, behave according to the precepts spontaneously without thinking about them. We’ve also learned to monitor our intentions and remember to do so, and we remember the standards for differentiating wholesome and unwholesome intentions. We keep in mind the values of renunciation, kindness and non-harming as guiding principles throughout the day, as well as our commitment to living a Buddhist life. We recall what the Buddha taught about impermanence and non-self, or, after some training resulting in internalization, we actually perceive the world directly in these terms.

Differences between early and modern understandings

The disconnect between *sati* in the early texts and modern “mindfulness” is easily and strikingly appreciated if we try to imagine how the gatekeeper, or how the bloke carrying the oil past the dancing girl mentioned in the similes above, would gain any help whatever through entering into a state of bare, pre-conceptual or non-judgmental awareness. Moreover, how do we guard the senses with no idea of what is evocative of unwholesome desires that we need to guard against? How would right “mindfulness” help as it circles around right action, for instance, if it cannot fulfill its function of discriminating or judging wholesome from unwholesome? Moreover, how would we revisit or further develop insights previously obtained through contemplative “mindfulness” practice without memory?

The disconnect is also appreciated in noting that “mindfulness” is consistently represented as passive or receptive in modern literature, whereas in the early

texts, *sati* is actively involved as a conditioning factor in the successful performance of particular tasks. For instance, a sudden crash in the next room would likely bring a new relevant proficiency to mind, activating new factors in working memory in order to provide the basis for comprehending the newly arisen circumstance, that is, figuring out what the hell is going on. However, it wouldn't draw in our "mindfulness"; it would more likely disrupt it.

A striking difference between the early and modern accounts of these matters is how comparatively precise the early teachings are in marked contrast to the modern accounts of "mindfulness," which tend to connote or intimate more than analyze what they describe. For instance, "mindfulness" is often described as "being present." I have never seen a coherent analysis of what this means, though it does *seem* subjectively to mean something. How can one not be present, both in body and mind? Every thought, action, breath, craving, perception, feeling or impulse arises in the present moment. But every recollection, manifestation of proficiency, aspiration, anticipation or daydream arises in the present as well, even while these mental events may bear content concerning something past, future or atemporal as well.²⁰

It should be noted that many of the exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* ("Foundations of Mindfulness") *Sutta* depend on *visualizing* what is not immediately physically apparent as an aspect of the present situation, for instance the body in future states of decay, or the body parts that are below the skin, both of which rely on our previous knowledge of such things, knowledge drawn from memory. Are we being present when we reflect on these?

A genealogy of "mindfulness"

The story of how "mindfulness" got mislabeled begins in colonial Burma about the turn of the twentieth century and takes us to the United States by the 1970's.

Burma. The nineteenth century had been very disruptive of the traditional cultural and religious fabric in many Asian lands under the hegemonic influence of European colonial power, with varying indigenous responses. Prior to British occupation, the *Buddhasāsana* had been supported by three

20 Would I be present, for instance, if I were to follow this guided meditation?: "... if you should be distracted by a noise in the room, just let the distraction go, and gently return to where you were in the daydream"?

pillars in Buddhist Burma: the royal government, the *Saṅgha* and the society at large. But then the British deposed the king in 1885 to fully control the levers of governmental power throughout Burma, showed little interest in supporting the *Sāsana* themselves, and curtailed the ability of the *Saṅgha* to participate in domestic affairs. This resulted in great concern in Burma for the continued well-being of Burmese society at large, and for the viability of the *Sāsana* in particular.

A prominent monk, Ledi Sayadaw (1846 – 1923)²¹ encouraged a doubling-down in practice and understanding as a way to respond to the situation: in ethics, in doctrinal study (largely of *Abhidhamma*), and later in insight meditation (*vipassanā*, based on the fifth-century *Visuddhimagga*) for *all* Buddhists. Ledi began a lecture circuit throughout Burma, established *ad hoc* study and practice groups wherever he went, and published widely,²² in order to convey this message. He was already a well-known public figure and popular speaker, with a knack for teaching complex *Dhammic* concepts in simple terms, and without the traditional heavy reliance on the Pali language.

Let's make a quick reality check with respect to our topic of interest here, Ledi's understanding of *sati* is described as ...

... the ability to bring knowledge of the *dhamma* to bear on the present moment, rooted in one of the 'establishings' (*upaṭṭhānas*). In other words, it is a sort of double-faceted mental state: recollection of Buddhist truths combined with awareness of immediate sensate experience.²³

In short, he was precisely on board with the age-old traditional view also recognized by Rhys Davids at that stage.

Ledi's promotional efforts are generally regarded as the primary impetus for a mass movement of lay participation in aspects of Buddhist practice, heretofore largely (not exclusively) reserved for monks, and many prominent teachers of *Dhamma* and *vipassanā* (almost all of them monks) facilitated this development.²⁴ The scope of the popular interest in meditation practice was perhaps unprecedented in Buddhist history, such that various meditation

21 Braun's (2013) excellent book on Ledi Sayadaw recounts much of what follows.

22 It was apparently under the British that the mass publication of Buddhist books first became possible.

23 This is Braun's (2013, 143) paraphrase or summary from a source he does not cite.

teachers attracted large followings and founded schools that are still well known in Burma today, almost certainly the meditating-est nation in the world.

Many teachers promoted techniques that were well integrated with the body of Buddhist practice and understanding, ethics and doctrinal study. For instance, Mohnyin Sayadaw was popular in the 1930's and required students to learn *Abhidhamma* before beginning *vipassanā* practice. Mogok Sayadaw taught a method rooted in studying dependent co-arising before beginning *vipassanā* practice. However, it should be noted that *vipassanā* schools across the board tended to disregard the teaching of *samādhi* or *jhāna*, since these are treated as extremely difficult and unnecessary, in the foundational *Visuddimaggā*, in stark contrast to the early texts. This marginalization of *jhāna* would play a significant role later in our story of how “mindfulness” would come to be understood in modernity.

Popular *vipassanā*. Other teachers recognized the limits in time and energy available to most householders, and so promoted methods whereby *vipassanā* could be taken up wholeheartedly as a stand-alone practice, largely isolated from ethics and doctrine, as well as from an ascetic lifestyle. This second trend naturally garnered more popular appeal, but also evoked criticism for “weakening the *Dhamma*.”

In early twentieth century Burma, One of the most successful popularizers was U Ba Khin (1899 – 1971), a government official, second in a rare non-monastic teaching lineage, whose lay teacher was allegedly authorized to teach by Ledi himself. U Ba Khin downplayed study, developed a simple method, intentionally congenial even to non-Buddhists, but also advocated a rigid schedule of meditation with 10-day periods of intense practice. U Ba Khin's disciple SN Goenka (1924 – 2013), a businessman who emigrated to India in 1969 and further marginalized doctrine, claiming that the Buddha had only taught an “art of living” rooted in meditation. Goenka founded a world-wide meditation movement that significantly distanced itself from its Buddhist roots.

Most influential among the popularizers was Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1870 – 1955), from whom most modern *vipassanā* teachers in Myanmar descend.²⁴ He endeavored to strip the teaching of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* down to its most

24 Cousins (1994, 41) claims that insight or *vipassanā* meditation did not exist in anything like its current form before the nineteenth century.

25 Braun (2013, 161).

essential elements so that it could be mastered with minimal effort, seemingly having taken very seriously the description of the *satipaṭṭhāna* as ‘the one way’ (*ekāyano maggo*) to liberation as justification for treating it as a stand-alone practice, and as the basis of the claim (unsupported in the early texts) that one could acquire an initial stage of awakening in very short time through *vipassanā* alone.²⁶

Mingun appears to have developed the expedient of making spare reference to *Dhamma* at least in the introductory stages of his method,²⁷ in contrast to many of his peers in Burma. Like U Ba Khin, he made use of an intensive retreat format, in fact founding the very first group meditation center in 1911. The clever, innovative method of “noting” allowed practice to be brought into ever-changing contexts throughout the day, ubiquitously and fluidly, rather than being fixed in one of the standard exercises at any one time, even turning distractions into opportunities for practice.

Mingun’s most prominent student was Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904 – 1982), who refined his teacher’s techniques and founded a school which is most widely known internationally of the Burmese *vipassanā* schools. The German monk Nyanaponika Thera (1901-1994), who had long lived in Sri Lanka, studied meditation in Myanmar under Mahāsi Sayadaw in the early Fifties, and became highly influential abroad through his 1954 book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, in which he coined the term ‘bare attention.’

Nyanaponika describes in his book what he calls “the Burmese method,” based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as explicated by Mingun and Mahāsi, as a practice of continuous observation in a manner that breaks down common experience into discrete momentary and localized events. To achieve this requires careful control of attention and non-distractedness. A fundamental principle is that the first steps of this method are grounded in the yogi’s own experience without theoretical explanation, although a meditation master can provide some input by suggesting that a student turn his attention to a particular experience, so that the yogi might gain insights into phenomena as they present themselves.²⁸

26 Sharf (2014, 944).

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

28 Nyanaponika (2014, 90-91).

A critique of popular meditation. The Berkeley scholar Robert Sharf²⁹ views historical popularization movements quite critically and draws striking parallels between the twentieth century movement in Burma and historical developments in the Chan/Zen tradition in eighth century China. In the latter case, Buddhist masters in the capital simplified meditation practice in response to demand among elite lay devotees, in order to make meditation accessible to those without doctrinal training, nor living an ascetic lifestyle, promising quick results and thereby promoting an effective democratization of awakening. As a result, meditation widely evolved to become a matter of setting aside distinctions and conceptualizations, and letting the mind rest in the flow of here and now.

At the time, traditionalists in China had criticized such methods as weakening the *Dhamma*. However, it seems to me that teaching something as sophisticated as *Dhamma* has always relied on provisional teachings that the student is able to grasp at his current level of engagement, to be corrected later through more accurate teachings, if and when the student is ready to devote more energy to understanding and practice. The Buddha famously taught this way. Given the limited time most lay people have to dedicate to Buddhist practice and given the sophistication of the *Dhamma*, simplification of practice and understanding might be justified in terms of meeting the moment and producing practical benefits. Surely, Mingun and Mahāsi were aware of the provisional nature of the Burmese method. Nyanaponika himself was aware of the provisional nature of “bare attention,”³⁰ though there is no indication of that in his influential book.

On the other hand, one might anticipate that provisional teachings introduced into a *mass* movement would tend to perpetuate themselves without correction, since the number of people receiving these teachings is likely to overwhelm proportionally the number of adepts capable of guiding practitioners beyond those provisional understandings. As a result a provisional teaching may accrue authority even among the newly adept.

America. Mahāsi’s technique, as well as that of Goenka, were designed to be taken up quite readily by anyone at any stage of practice in Burma, and was easily exported to foreign lands.³¹ Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon

29 Sharf (2014, 2018, etc.).

30 Bodhi (2011, 28-9), who was a disciple of Nyanaponika, points this out.

31 Sharf (2014, 942).

Salzburg were three young pioneers, who traveled separately to Asia and studied *vipassanā* with Mahāsi, Goenka and others. They collaborated in the States to found the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts in the mid-1970's, which came to focus on the Mahāsi method. They would exert an enormous influence on the American *vipassanā* movement, and on the development of westernized Buddhism in general.

When the Mahāsi method and other methods adapted for popular application in Burma encountered American popular culture, it was a match made in heaven. The culture in the wild west of Buddhism valued personal experience and, in all its individualism, was suspicious of institutions and external authority.³² Rather than promoting *Dhamma*, it asked that one “find one's authentic voice, one's own inner truth.”³³ The early vision of IMS was of bare practice with almost no rituals nor non-meditation activities. For IMS, authority came from meditation practice itself.

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. One might even attend a *vipassanā* retreat one month and learn Sufi dancing the next. 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,³⁴ with decidedly mix-and-match, plug-and-play, build-your-own tendencies, to which “mindfulness” as a stand-alone practice was amenable. It is therefore not surprising that meditation methods that were modular, led quickly to intense personal experiences and did not appeal to doctrine would have great appeal in this modern culture.

The criticism of the Mahāsi method and related methods continues in some quarters in the modern west. Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses his concern that contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view and right resolve in their understanding of “mindfulness,” in favor of merely being present, going so far as regarding *Dhamma* – quoting other teachers – as “claptrap” or “mumbo-jumbo,” while their meditation is “unconstrained by dogma,”³⁵ presumably

32 McMahan (2008, 58, 188). The essence of Buddhism was to become an inner experience (McMahan, 2008, 42-43).

33 McMahan (2008, 189).

34 Carrette and King (2004, 42, 128).

35 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

referring to *Dhamma*. Meanwhile, Alan Wallace is concerned that *vipassanā* had become a radically simplified teaching for the general lay public, “dumbed down” and overlooking the richness of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.³⁶

What is this “mindfulness” thing?

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (the historical precursor to *vipassanā* contemplation) describes the integration of many factors into the practice it promotes, only one of which is *sati*, in the *satipaṭṭhāna* method. We have the two factors of *sati* and comprehension, brought together in the often repeated compound *sati-sampajañña*. Both factors are highlighted along with ardency and unhinderedness (“having put away covetousness and grief for the world”) as the method upon which *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is based. *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice itself is a process of contemplation, captured, for instance, in the phrase “dwelling observant of body.” Right proficiency gives rise to *samādhi*, and *samādhi* is routinely present during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice according to the early texts (even if generally unacknowledged by *vipassanā* practitioners).³⁷

Where is “mindfulness” among this constellation of factors? I would suggest it is the convergence of the various factors. Ardency, comprehension and unhinderedness are primary contributors, since these manifest as heightened and sustained attentiveness to the present practice situation. If “mindfulness” feels like a meditative state, then *samādhi* is present (or at least its antecedent state of tranquility, *passaddhi*), contributing stability to the experience, as well as the stripping away of conceptual content and affective response.³⁸ The contemplative task itself produces a receptive or nonjudgmental aspect of the experience.

Oddly, one factor that seems at best marginally implicated in the “mindfulness” experience is ... *sati*! If we are intent on staying “in the present,” there is little

36 Wallace and Bodhi (2006). For a “dumbed-down” practice, the Burmese method was in another sense quite intelligently conceived.

37 See my related papers *the satipaṭṭhāna method* and *the miracle of samādhi* for explanations of these various interacting factors. The early definition of *samādhi*, the one which can just spring up rather spontaneously under certain conditions, went through a radical shift by the time of the fifth-century Pali commentaries, upon which Burmese *vipassanā* is based, as clearly demonstrated in modern scholarship. See Shankman (2008), Kumāra (2022, 10-22). In particular, the seminal *Visuddhimagga* described *jhānas* as rare states cultivated with much effort.

38 This statement might seem controversial, but see my related paper *the miracle of samādhi* on the ubiquity of this meditative state.

room for memory or proficiency. The Burmese method is based on the student's own experience prior to theoretical explanation, convenient for the yogi who has little time for study of *Dhamma*. It seems that "mindfulness" was thereby born in an historical accident when *sati*'s function was marginalized in popular *vipassanā*, and the term *sati* was in need of a referent. Inversely, since *samādhi*'s function was unacknowledged in the *vipassanā* tradition, the meditative state that is part of the "mindfulness" experience was in need of a name. It (along with its established gloss 'mindfulness') was accordingly presumed to designate broadly the lucid experience of continual attentiveness to the present moment, captured in the phrase "bare awareness," and subsuming *samādhi* and other factors.

To compound this oddity, "mindfulness" was also presumed to be a single thing, rather than something that can be broken down into individual factors, factors that had already been clearly described and integrated in the early texts. It concerns me that clinical research on "mindfulness," for instance, measures a subject's "mindfulness" on a linear scale using questionnaires like the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), and even seeks neural correlates of "mindfulness," before understanding what "mindfulness" really is, in spite of the mislabel.

Conclusions

"Mindfulness" is an historical accident, but perhaps useful in its time and place as a provisional understanding of mental cultivation in Buddhist practice. The Buddha himself was known for adapting teachings to the moment, and I have no basis to fault the main actors in the historical development of "mindfulness." Each met the moment aptly and in the best interests of the flourishing of the *Sāsana*. I personally admire each of them, from the wise and compassionate *sayadaws* to the infectiously enthusiastic young practitioners, who have now matured into distinguished teachers themselves. I have no doubt that "mindfulness" practice will continue to have a large following in the west and will continue to benefit many people. I would hope, however, that its promoters will be forthright about its ultimate limits, and make clear that it will not (or will rarely) produce stages of awakening as a stand-alone practice.

Nonetheless, I think it is time that serious scholars and teachers reconsider critically this provisional teaching as the *Sāsana* matures in the modern world.

We need to look beyond “mindfulness” in order to develop an accurate and complete understanding of the practice of the *Dhamma* in the ancient traditions. Unfortunately Rhys Davids’ once apt translation ‘mindfulness’ is, I am convinced, firmly co-opted and perhaps irrevocably bound to the meaning that is mislabeled ‘mindfulness.’ For many of us with western training in meditation, when we see the word ‘mindfulness’ or even ‘*sati*’ we automatically think “mindfulness.” I find *myself* doing this, and *I* know better. *Sati* is an active process of recollection appropriate to the current task, not a meditative state.

This suggests that it might be best not only to shed the concept “mindfulness” from our discussion of the ancient texts, but to find a new translation for *sati*, as well. Quite simply, scholars and teachers of traditional Buddhism no longer own the English word ‘mindfulness,’ and must appropriate another. I’ve tried many alternatives, and am presently quite satisfied with ‘proficiency.’ This recovers, I think, what Rhys Davids meant by ‘mindfulness,’ albeit in a way that frames Buddhist understanding and practice firmly in terms of skill development and skilled performance within human cognition. Others may prefer an alternative translation.

This paper is part of a series on *Rethinking Satipaṭṭhāna*. Please go to <http://sitagu.org/cintita/satipatthana/> for references and for access to other papers in the series.