4. *Sati* no longer means “mindfulness”

By 1881 the scholar T.W. Rhys Davids found the optimal translation for the Pali word *sati*. Previous translators had variously tried ‘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 on.[1] 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 narrowly suggestive of its specific active 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 sampajâno*); 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 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

1. Gethin (2011, pp. 264-5).

2. Rhys Davids (1881, p. 145). *Sampajâno* is a variant of *sampajañña* ‘discernment,’ discussed in 4.2 below.

3. Gethin (2011, pp. 264-5).

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

> 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 Rhys Davids' original intent grounded in the earliest scriptures had become obscured.

As Wallace alludes, the concept "mindfulness" (I use the double quotes throughout to indicate roughly whatever is commonly understood nowadays under the word '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 shaped my early practice, for instance. For each of us, it corresponds subjectively and individually to very real experiences that we learn to cultivate and through which we make progress in our practice. My intention is not to deny such experiences, but to point out that because of a semantic shift in the word 'mindfulness,' the word no longer serves as a viable translation of *sati*. As long as it is retained, the *Dhamma* will never quite make sense in English translation. This acknowledgment is critical for scholars and for anyone who is intent on a deep understanding of the *Dhamma* in any of its traditional forms.

We will first consider in more detail how "mindfulness" is understood in modern Buddhism and then contrast that with how *sati* was used as a technical term in the early texts. We will then attempt to trace how "mindfulness" has been shaped by the demands and fashions of modern popular culture.

4.1. Modern understandings of "mindfulness"

"Mindfulness" is widely regarded as a meditative state. 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 was that of 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 Guṇaratana 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 is often cited:

> "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 "choiceless awareness," or simply receptive of present experience without elaboration. Thich Nhat Hanh tells us:

> "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]

And Jon Kabat-Zinn states:

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

4.2. Early Buddhist understanding of *sati*

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*

5. Nyanaponika (1973, p. 15).

6. Gunaratana (1996, p. 140).

7. Gunaratana (1996, p. 190).

8. Nhat Hanh (2010).

9. Kabat-Zinn (2005).

standards,"[10] described in the following phrase from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,

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

The cognate word in Sanskrit, *smṛti,* has a similar meaning but is also commonly used specifically in reference to memory of sacred Brahmanic texts or even to the body of sacred texts itself. For many centuries these were preserved in 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 a *Dhamma* teaching to mind so that it can then be examined and investigated by means of the second awakening factor, *dhamma-investigation* (*dhamma-vicaya*):

> … 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* fulfills the awakening factor of *sati* at that time. Whenever, *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 *dhamma*-investigation 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 prudence, 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)

Moreover, various examples and similes that the Buddha offers for *sati* involve the skillful performance of some task[13] (each of which demands attentiveness, and also some degree of "know-how"), bringing to mind the relevant background knowledge, standards, perspectives and skills one has learned and

10. See chapter 2.

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, p. 269). Levman (2017) provides many examples.

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

holding them there. In fact, almost all examples of *sati* in the early *Dhamma* are specifically activated in working memory for quick interpretation or response with regard to present circumstances.[14]

For instance, as an example of "*sati* directed at the body" (see 2.3), 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" (see 2.2.1). In either case, it is imperative that one draw on all of one's know-how to accomplish a practical task. The Buddha declares once again that "a noble disciple" is like that: "recollective, possessing supreme *sati* and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago."[16]

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 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. As Rhys Davids put it: "one of the duties most frequently inculcated on the good Buddhist." Remembering our standards is the basis of restraining our behavior and is compared in another simile to binding animals to a post in order to constrain their movements.[18]

"Skillful engagement" is perhaps the most central concept in this book, in which *sati* serves to bring to mind and maintain in mind, those aspects of *Dhamma* that are relevant to the fulfillment of the current practice task.[19] Recall that Rhys Davids actually adopted 'mindfulness' on the basis of two Pali words that commonly co-occur: *sato* [*sati*] and *sampajâno* [*sampajañña*]. *Sampajañña* is translated here as 'discernment,' and elsewhere often as '(clear) comprehension.' *Sati-sampajañña* ('recollection-discernment') comes to a clear understanding of the immediate needs of the practice task in the current situation in accordance with *Dhamma*:

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14. See Dreyfus (2011) on *sati* as working memory.

15. SN 47.20. See 2.3 for more discussion of this example.

16. AN 7.67 iv 110-1.

17. SN 35.244 iv 189.

18. SN 35.247 iv 199-200.

19. See 2.1.2 and 6.3 for further discussion of skillful engagement.

> And what is the nutriment for restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: recollection-discernment. (AN 10.16 v 115)

I argue that these two factors together form the core of "skillful engagement" or "right recollection" (*sammā sati*)[20] to support performance in accordance with *Dhamma* of any aspect of Buddhist wisdom or ethical practice. Right recollection 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 *sati*. Thus these three qualities–right view, right effort, and right *sati*–run and circle around right |action|. (MN 117 iii 72-76)

This passage is presented also with respect to |resolve|, |speech|, |action|, and |livelihood|. Buddhist practice across the board is thereby performed on the basis of *Dhammic* proficiency: standards, values, viewpoints, and learned skills, which have been acquired in developing right view, internalized through repeated practice, brought to bear in right *sati*, and energized through right effort.

The practice of right *sati* will often give rise spontaneously to right *samādhi*:[21]

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

Accordingly, we remember our precepts as we go about our lives. We remember to monitor our intentions. 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.

4.3. Differences in 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 would we

20. The near equivalence of these terms is explained in 2.4.

21. See 3.2 for further discussion of this point.

guard the senses with no idea of what is evocative of unwholesome desires that we need to guard against? How would "mindfulness" help if it were to circle around right action, for instance, if it cannot fulfill its function of discerning wholesome and unwholesome? Moreover, how would we revisit or train insights *previously* obtained through "mindfulness" if we "observe everything as if it was occurring for the first time"?

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, if a "CRASH!" were suddenly to occur in the next room, it would likely disrupt our "mindfulness" but draw our attention along with recollection of similar crashes and their causes, in order to assess what the hell is going on.

A striking difference between the early and modern accounts of these matters is how comparatively precise and detailed the early teachings are in marked contrast to the hazy and variant descriptions of a stand-alone "mindfulness" factor. For instance, "mindfulness" is often described as "being present." How can one *not* be present? Even reminiscence, or a daydream arises in the present moment. Many of the exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* depend on "visualizing" what is not immediately physically apparent in the present situation, for instance, visualizing the body in future states of decay, or visualizing the body parts below the skin. Would the requirement of presence preclude these? Suppose you were following 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 …." Would the requirement of presence preclude this? I'm not sure.

4.4. The genesis of "mindfulness"

The story of how the meaning of Rhys Davids' 'mindfulness' became "mindfulness" seems to begin in colonial Burma about the turn of the twentieth century and takes us to the United States by the 1970's.

Burma. The influence of European colonial power in the nineteenth century was very disruptive of the traditional cultural and religious fabric in many Asian lands, with varying indigenous responses. Prior to British occupation, the *Buddhasāsana* had been supported by three pillars of society in Buddhist Burma: the royal government, the *Saṅgha* and the society at large. However, 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 viability of the S*āsana* and for the continued well-being of Burmese society at large.

A prominent monk, Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923),[22] encouraged a doubling-down on Buddhist practice by householders 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*[23]) for *all* Buddhists. Ledi began a lecture circuit throughout Burma, established *ad hoc* study and practice groups wherever he went, and published widely,[24] in order to convey this message. He had already been a well-known public figure and popular speaker before the king was deposed, with a knack for teaching complex *Dhammic* concepts in simple terms, and without the traditional heavy reliance on the Pali language.

Let's pause here for a moment to make a quick reality check of something I ran across in Eric Braun's book on Ledi Sayadaw with regard to the topic of interest. He describes Ledi's understanding of *sati* as follows:

> "… 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."[25]

Ledi was precisely on board with the age-old traditional view described above as the early Buddhist understanding, and recognized by his contemporary Rhys Davids. Now, back to our story:

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 occupied by monastics. Many prominent teachers of *Dhamma* and *vipassanā* (almost all of them monks) facilitated this development. The degree of the popular interest in meditation practice was *almost* unprecedented in Buddhist history, such that various meditation teachers attracted large followings and founded schools that are still well known in Burma today, now

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

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

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

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

almost certainly the meditating-est nation in the world.[26]

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 that students 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 were treated as extremely difficult and unnecessary in the foundational *Visuddimagga*, in stark contrast to the early texts.[27] This marginalization of *jhāna* would play a significant role in our story of how "mindfulness" would come to be understood in modernity.

4.4.1. Popular *vipassanā*. Other early *vipassanā* masters 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*," as discussed below.

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 first teacher was authorized to teach by Ledi himself. U Ba Khin downplayed study, developed a simple method that was intentionally congenial even to non-Buddhists, but also advocated a rigid schedule of meditation with ten-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, claimed that the Buddha had only taught an "art of living" rooted in meditation. Goenka founded a world-wide meditation movement that significantly, but not entirely, distanced itself from its Buddhist roots.

Most influential among the early popularizers was Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1870–1955), from whom most modern *vipassanā* teachers in Myanmar descend.[28] He endeavored to strip the teaching of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* down to

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26. Author's assessment.

27. It is now widely acknowledged in modern scholarship that the meaning of *samādhi* in this later tradition had become something quite distinct from the early meaning, for instance Shankman (2008, esp. pp. 101-4) Kumāra (2022, pp. 10-22), Thanissaro 1996, pp. 248-51), Polak (2011).

28. Braun (2013, p. 161).

its most essential elements so that it could be mastered with minimal effort. He seems to have 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.[29] With the downplay of *Dhammic* wisdom and of virtue as skills acquired through long and sustained practice, progress was measured in terms of transformational "spiritual experiences" or "altered states of consciousness."[30]

Mingun appears to have developed the expedient of making sparse reference to *Dhamma*, at least in the introductory stages of his method,[31] in contrast to many of his peers in Burma. Like U Ba Khin, he made use of an intensive retreat format, and in fact had founded the very first group meditation center in Burma in 1911. A clever, innovative, and valuable method of "noting" allowed practice to be brought into ever-changing contexts ubiquitously and fluidly throughout the day. Rather than taking up the standard exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* one by one, this turned even distractions into opportunities for practice.

Mingun's most prominent student was Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904–1982). Mahāsi refined his teacher's techniques and founded what is the most widely known internationally among the Burmese *vipassanā* schools, after receiving a large boost through Burmese government sponsorship in the 1950's. 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.'

In this book Nyanaponika describes 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 management of attention and non-distractedness. The first steps of this method are grounded in the practitioner's own experience without theoretical explanation, although a meditation master can provide some input

29. Sharf (2014, p. 944). I argue against this justification in 1.1.

30. Sharf (1995) argues convincingly that the role attributed to meditative *experience* is characteristic of Buddhist modernism, but has little precedent in scripture. For instance, "by rendering Buddhist wisdom a mental event as opposed to an acquired skill, the rigors of monastic training could be circumvented" (p. 267).

31. Braun (2013, p. 161), Sharf (2014, p. 952).

by suggesting that a student turn his attention to a particular experience, so that the practitioner might gain insights into phenomena as they present themselves.[32]

4.4.2. America. Mahāsi's technique, as well as that of Goenka, were designed to be taken up quite readily by anyone at any level of Buddhist commitment and opportunity in Burma, and each was easily exported to foreign lands.[33] Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzburg were three young pioneers, who traveled separately to Asia and studied *vipassanā* with Mahāsi, Goenka and others, and also in Thailand and India. They collaborated in the United 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.

It was a match made in heaven when the Mahāsi method and other methods adapted for popular application in Burma encountered American popular culture. The culture of the wild west of Buddhism valued personal experience and, in all its individualism, was suspicious of institutions and external authority.[34] Rather than promoting *Dhamma*, it asked that one "find one's authentic voice, one's own inner truth."[35] 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 in America as 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 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,[36] with a mix-and-match, plug-and-play, "build-your-own" quality 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 minimized doctrine would have great appeal in this modern culture.

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32. Nyanaponika (1973, pp. 90-91).

33. Sharf (2014, p. 942).

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

35. McMahan (2008, p. 189).

36. Carrette and King (2004, pp. 42, 128).

4.5. The limits of "mindfulness" practice

A fundamental thesis of this book is that *satipaṭṭhāna* is a process of acquiring and internalizing the skill of *Dhammic* perception and behavior. *Dhamma* is not totally absent in "mindfulness" meditation, but it tends to be limited to the teachings of impermanence and conditionality. Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses his concern that contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view and right intention in their understanding of "mindfulness," in favor of merely being present. They go so far as regarding *Dhamma*—quoting other teachers—as "claptrap" or "mumbo-jumbo," while their meditation is "unconstrained by dogma,"[37] presumably 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*.[38] Robert Sharf bemoans the lack of engagement of "mindfulness" with Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist ways of life.[39] Jay Garfield regards "mindfulness" as hijacked by the "mindfulness industry and missing its earliest resonances, including its sense of ethical commitment."[40]

Sharf[41] likewise regards historical popularization movements quite critically and draws striking parallels between the early 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 for the benefit of elite lay devotees without doctrinal training, nor grounding in an ascetic lifestyle. The masters promised quick results and thereby promoted 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. This is similar to what we see with in modern *vipassanā* movement. Sharf points out that, at the time, traditionalists in China had criticized such methods as weakening the *Dhamma*.

With the *weakening* of Dhama, the function of popular meditation is often reconceptualized in terms of facilitating certain subjective "experiences" or "states of consciousness": religious, spiritual, or mystical. Often these experiential states are popularly identified with degrees of awakening (such as stream entry), levels of *jhāna*, or glimpses of awakening (*kensho*, *satori*).

37. Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

38. Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

39. Sharf (2015, p. 477).

40. Garfield (2012, p. 86).

41. Sharf (2014, 2018, etc.).

However, traditional Theravada or Mahayana texts, including the early Buddhist texts, provide scant reference to the value of personal experiences. Such experiences do occur, but where such experiences are mentioned in the early texts, they generally serve only as reference points in traditional instructions, rather than as goals of practice.[42]

4.6. The danger of "mindfulness" practice

David McMahan spotlights what may be the greatest pitfall of modern "mindfulness." Modern "mindfulness" teachers often claim that "mindfulness" and popular *vipassanā* facilitate personal *discovery* of the *Dhamma* in our personal experience. Sometimes "mindfulness" is even described as a technology for gaining a transparent, objective view of the content of the mind in order to realize "things as they are" (*yathā-bhūta*), shorn of all cultural conditioning, biases, and emotional entanglements, and beyond concepts and doctrine.[43]

While offering a justification for the dearth of *Dhamma* in Buddhist "mindfulness" practice, this claim sounds like trying to reinvent the *Dhamma* wheel, leaving one wondering, "Why did the Buddha teach so much *Dhamma* if simple 'mindfulness' is all we need to accomplish what he had accomplished?"

In fact, this account has it backwards:[44] in Buddhist practice one starts with *Dhamma*, then perfects it through right recollection and *satipaṭṭhāna*. In fact, for best results, one immerses oneself in *Dhamma*, lives in a like-minded community (ideally with paragons of *Dhammic* virtue and wisdom), studies *Dhamma*, and attempts to embody the principles and practices of *Dhamma* in one's daily life.[45] Those intent on musical virtuosity must similarly immerse themselves in music, musical culture and musical training. For McMahan, without a proper, sociocultural context, meditation practice is unintelligible.[46]

However, if "mindfulness" is not practiced in a proper *Dhammic* context, and "mindfulness" does not generate its own *Dhamma*, what exactly does "mindfulness" do? I think the answer is that it serves to support and strengthen

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42. Sharf (1995).

43. McMahan (2023, pp. 16, 83).

44. The chapters of this book should make this clear.

45. *Satipaṭṭhāna* is never a stand-alone practice in the early texts, but an advanced practice with *Dhammic* prerequisites (see 1.1), particularly in the maturation of virtue.

46. McMahan (2023, p. 55). McMahan (2023, p. 154) makes the claim that the context is always sociocultural.

the principles and practices of whatever context it happens to be embedded. These are likely to include secular cultural conditioning, biases, emotional entanglements, concepts, and doctrine of the dominant culture. Let me give an example:

"Individualism," is a pervasive concept and practice in modern culture, perhaps nowhere more than the United States. "The self" is regarded as autonomous, as the home of spirituality, creativity and morality, along with the imperative to be "true to oneself," in opposition to social pressures.[47] This ideology is so familiar to most of us, that it is rarely questioned; it is "common sense," a form of blind faith. Nonetheless, this way of thinking arose only in 17th to 18th century Europe, to be promoted in the European Enlightenment, Romanticism, humanistic psychology, and the human potential movement, where it had no influence Buddhism.

In spite of its obscure, non-Buddhist origins, the autonomous self is presented by many western Buddhist teachers as being at the core of Buddhism itself,[48] according to which one's purpose is to "discover your true self." From a Buddhist perspective, this ideology is based on a questionable metaphysics that is inimical to understanding of the Buddhist teaching of "non-self." I propose that this manner of teaching arose as a result of "mindfulness" and *vipassanā* practice that was grounded in secular culture, rather than grounded in *Dhamma*. Modern Buddhism is burdened, as McMahan puts it, with "cultural baggage."[49]

Unfortunately, corporations have gotten wind of the kind of docility produced in secular "mindfulness," and adapted it to the corporate context. Regarding it as a kind of mental capital,[50] they have invested heavily in promoting "mindfulness" practices in the workforce. Google's "Search Inside Yourself" mindfulness training program is one of the best known examples.[51] The pervasiveness of such programs in the corporate world has prompted Slavoj Žižek to declare that "mindfulness" is "establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism," helping us "to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retraining the appearance of mental sanity."[52] Marianne

47. McMahan (2023, pp. 147-149).

48. McMahan (2023, pp. 150-151). McMahan (2008) and Thanissaro (2013) catalog ideologies of Western origin often presented in modernity as Buddhist.

49. McMahan (2023, p. 134).

50. Purser (2018, p. 29)

51. Purser (2018, p. 131)

52. This is quoted by Purser (2018, p. 29).

Williamson, speaking at Google, and in response to a particular protest whose "heartfelt message" had been been glibbly addressed through "mindful" reflection, critiqued, "Only in modern America could we come up with some ersatz version of spirituality that gives us a pass on addressing unnecessary human suffering in our midst."[53]

How does Buddhist practice retain its integrity in the context of the modern secular world? McMahan reminds us that early Buddhism developed in an ascetic counter-cultural movement that was disillusioned with the dominant society and skeptical of its goals, values and religious institutions.[54] This movement formed the core of the early *Saṅgha*, in which disciples of the Buddha—drop-outs from conventional life—were able to immerse themselves in *Dhamma* in a like-minded community. Because of the way the *Saṅgha* is constituted, they were able to do this in relative isolation from the counter-vailing influence of the dominant culture, yet from there, could serve as role models, and project *Dhammic* influence back into the prevailing society. The *Saṅgha* continues to play this role to this day, generally sustaining its radical qualities in any prevailing culture.[55]

4.7. Conclusions

"Mindfulness" is an historical accident, nonetheless useful in its time and place as a provisional understanding of mental cultivation. 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 understand and be forthright about its ultimate limits, and make clear that it is unlikely to fulfill the Buddhist fruits often attributed to it as a stand-alone practice. In this way, those of high aspiration and opportunity will be aware of an opportunity for Buddhist practice beyond the limits of the "mindfulness" movement.

Moreover, serious scholars and teachers, in particular, do well to reconsider critically this provisional teaching as the *Buddhasāsana* matures in the modern world. We need to look beyond "mindfulness" in order to develop an accurate and complete understanding of the practice of *Dhamma* reflective of ancient traditions. Unfortunately Rhys Davids' once apt translation of *sati* is, I am convinced, firmly co-opted, and perhaps irrevocably bound to, our pervasive

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53. This is quoted by Purser (2018, p. 181).

54. McMahan (2023, p. 137).

55. The role of the Saṅgha in sustaining the integrity of Buddhism is the theme of Cintita (2014).

modern understanding “mindfulness.” This suggests that it might be best not only to shed the naïve 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.

In the other chapters of Rethinking *Satipaṭṭhāna* I simply revert to translating *sati* as ‘recollection,’ with the understanding that this is recollection of “*Dhammic* know-how.” I am also partial to Garfield’s[56] recommendation of ‘conscientiousness’ as a translation of *sati*. It captures much of Rhys Davids’ original (but now lost) intent in translating *sati* as ‘mindfulness.’

56. Garfield (2021, p. 86).