Mindfulness-Based Interventions and the four *satipaṭṭhāna*s

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Abstract:

This article explores to what degree Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) can be considered to fulfil the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness, *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*, in the way these are described in early Buddhist discourse. A comparative survey of the core elements of such practice, described in the Pāli *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels, shows that current employment of mindfulness in health care and education, in spite of some degree of affinity, does not really qualify as an implementation of the four establishments of mindfulness. Better precedents for MBIs could be found in early Buddhist instructions on mindful eating and on how to face physical pain with mindfulness.

Key words:

Early Buddhism; MBIs; mindfulness; overeating; pain; *satipaṭṭhāna.*

Introduction

An emphasis on the present moment is an element shared by contemporary Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) and traditional Buddhist mindfulness practice (Anālayo 2019a), described in texts reflecting the early period of Buddhist thought and practice between the 5th and 3rd century BCE (Anālayo 2012). This raises the question of whether these two modalities of mindfulness practice also correspond in other ways. In particular, does the employment of mindfulness in the clinical setting and in education, etc., fulfil the purposes the early Buddhist discourses associate with the systematic cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness, the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*?

Contemplation of the Body

The first of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthāna*s concerns mindful contemplation of the body. The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels differ considerably in their respective presentations of such contemplation, as can be seen from Table 1 below (Anālayo 2011).
The Pāli *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10) presents six different exercises. All of these recur in its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel (MĀ 98). In addition to these correspondences (marked with the help of arrows), the *Madhyama-āgama* version has five extra practices. The parallel in the *Ekottarika-āgama* (EĀ 12.1), however, has only three exercises in common with the other two discourses. It thereby does not have a counterpart to three of the practices shared by the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and

its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel (indicated with ≠). The *Ekottarika-āgama* version also has one additional practice that is not found in its two parallels.

From the viewpoint of the oral transmission of these three discourses, practices occurring only in one version can, with a fairly high degree of confidence, be reckoned as later additions. In contrast, material they have in common can, with a comparable degree of confidence, be considered as reflecting early elements in descriptions of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation. Of particular significance for appreciating the main thrust of the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* of contemplation of the body are therefore the following three exercises (Anālayo 2013):

anatomical parts
elements (four or six)
decaying corpse

The first of these three requires contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body, an exercise that in all versions is combined with an explicit element of evaluation. According to this evaluation, the body should be seen as unclean or even impure (*asuci*/不淨). The practice aims at bringing about a removal of sensual desires in relation to human bodies, one's own and those of others.

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Table 1 Survey of Body Contemplations

MN 10	MĀ 98	EĀ 12.1
breathing (1)	postures (→ 2)	anatomical parts (→ 4)
postures (2)	activities (→ 3)	four elements (→ 5)
activities (3)	counter unwholesome mental states	bodily orifices
anatomical parts (4)	forceful mind control	decaying corpse (→ 6)
four elements (5)	breathing (→ 1)	
decaying corpse (6)	bodily experience of absorption	
	perception of light	
	grasp sign of contemplation	
	anatomical parts (→ 4)	
	six elements (→ 5)	
	decaying corpse (→ 6)	(≠ 1, 2, 3)

The second contemplation, which takes up the material constitution of the body in terms of its elements, involves a deconstruction of the perception of one's own body as a solid unit. This finds exemplification in a simile, which illustrates the practice with the example of a butcher who kills a cow and then sells its parts. Similar to the butcher's shift of perception from what was earlier seen as a "cow" to what then became different "pieces of meat" he is putting out for sale, a practitioner should experience a shift of perception toward seeing the body as merely a conglomeration of different material elements.

The third contemplation, concerning the mortal nature of the body, requires directing attention to different stages of decay of a corpse, combined with the understanding that one's own body is bound to this same fate as well. Besides revealing the lack of appeal of a human body, once it begins to decay, a central thrust of this exercise is to drive home its mortality.

It seems fair to conclude that the purposes of these three exercises do not correspond closely to those of the current secular employment of mindfulness. This is not to deny that there is an overlap, inasmuch as mindfulness is directed towards the body. But the overall objective is clearly not the same.

Expanding the scope of contemplation of the body from those exercises found in all versions to those found at least in two parallels leads to one form of body contemplation that can more easily be related to MBIs. This is contemplation of the postures of the body, found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel.

The significance of this practice for reconstructing early Buddhist meditation theory has been evaluated differently in academic study. Schmithausen (1976) pointed out that the mode of contemplation when being mindful of the postures of the body is closely similar the mode of practice evident in the second and third *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthāna*s. However, his assessment that mindfulness of the body's postures is therefore an early formulation of the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* met with criticism by Bronkhorst (1985).

From a comparative perspective, it would indeed seem less probable that this exercise was originally an integral part of the instructions on contemplation of the body. Nevertheless, Schmithausen's assessment of the nature of this practice as reflecting a modality of mindfulness found also in the second and third establishments of mindfulness remains an accurate observation. This points to the need to give due recognition to the significance of mindful contemplation of the body's postures, which requires being aware if one is walking, standing, sitting, or lying down (Anālayo 2019a). Such practice involves a training in proprioception, the ability to know how one's own body is disposed.

Turning to MBIs, Kabat-Zinn (2018, p. 1980) related the body scan, which is part of the curriculum of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), to the sense of proprioception, commenting that

> when we practice the body scan, our awareness includes that very sense of proprioception … in the case of [such] proprioception … we truly give ourselves over to *listening* to the body in a disciplined and loving way and persevere at it for days, weeks, months, and years as a discipline and as a love affair in and of itself.

Judging from the above extract, even though attending to the sense of proprioception is indeed an element common to both traditional contemplation of bodily postures and MBSR, the overall intention does not appear to be the same. The idea of mindfulness of the body undertaken as "a love affair in and of itself" is certainly meaningful in the context of MBSR but at the same time points in a different direction from the main thrust of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation in early Buddhism. This main thrust, as evident in the three contemplations common to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, comprises an evaluation of the body as unclean or even impure, a deconstruction of its solidity, and an emphasis on its mortality and eventual decay. Although contemplation of the postures of the body does not have a comparable thrust, its main purpose appears to be just a grounding in embodied presence in the here and now, not a stimulation of some form of love or affection for the body.

In sum, it seems fair to conclude that, in spite of some overlap in the cultivation of attention to proprioception, the overall attitude underlying mindfulness of the body in traditional *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation differs from the attitude behind instructions on MBSR.

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Contemplating Feeling Tones and Mental States

The second and third *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* direct mindfulness to the recognition of feeling tones and mental states. At first sight, these two establishments of mindfulness seem to offer a more promising avenue for finding common ground with MBIs, given that mindfully facing pain without mental reactivity is a core element of the clinical employment of mindfulness. This involves attending to the same two dimensions of experience taken up in the second and third *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*: feeling tone and mental state.

Without intending to deny such overlap, however, it seems nevertheless that there is a discernible difference in the overall objective. In the case of contemplation of feeling tones, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels agree in directing mindful attention to discerning not only the three main hedonic tones of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences, but also distinguish each of these three into "worldly" (*sāmisa*/食) and "unworldly" occurrences. Although the implications of this terminology are not immediately self-evident, an examination of other relevant usages in the discourses makes it fair to conclude that an ethical perspective is being introduced here (Anālayo 2019b). The point at stake would then be to discern whether pleasant feeling tones are related to sensual lust or its absence, painful feeling tones to anger or its absence, and neutral feeling tones to delusion or its absence.

The same ethical distinction continues with the first three mental states listed for contemplation of the mind. The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels agree in directing mindfulness to the recognition of the presence or absence of sensual lust, anger, and delusion.

The remaining states of mind are for the most part concerned with monitoring the cultivation of tranquility and insight during formal meditation practice, something that is also not within the purview of typical MBIs.

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Once again, in spite of an undeniable overlap and commonality, there is a discernable difference in the concerns underlying traditional *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation, namely an overall orientation toward ethical repercussions and the cultivation of tranquility and insight in formal meditation, and the concerns of MBIs with health-related benefits and improvements of work-performance.

Contemplation of Dharmas

The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* concerns *dharma*s. The implications of the term *dharma* here are open to interpretation, as in its general usage the same word can convey a range of different meanings (Geiger 1920 and Carter 1978). In the context of the fourth establishment of mindfulness, a recurrent translation of *dharma*s as "mental objects" remains unconvincing (Anālayo 2003). This holds even for the Pāli version, which has assembled the broadest range of practices under the heading of contemplation of *dharma*s. Yet, none of these naturally fit the idea of mental objects. Nor does the idea of mental objects provide a meaningful contrast to the first three *satipaṭṭhāna*s/*smṛtyupasthāna*s.

If the idea of "mental objects" is taken in a loose sense as describing anything experienced in the mind, then all four *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*s could be included under this heading. Taking the same idea of "mental objects" in a more restricted sense of experiences not directly related to the five senses also does not work. Contemplation of the sense-spheres, an exercise found under the header of contemplation of *dharma*s in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and in its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, comprises all six senses and their respective objects. Hence, in this case "mental objects" as experienced by the sixth sense of the mind would correspond only to a fraction of the compass of the whole exercise.

Thus, a translation of *dharma*s as "mental objects", although certainly meaningful in other contexts, does not seem to work for the fourth *satpaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*. For appreciating the central thrust of this exercise, the comparative perspective can again be relied on, as presented in summary form in Table 2 below (Anālayo 2011).

Comparing the descriptions of the fourth establishment of mindfulness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two discourse parallels results in only a single topic as their common ground: the awakening factors. The hindrances could also be included, as these are taken up explicitly in two versions (MN 10 and MĀ 98) and mentioned in the third (EĀ 12.1), although here at a different juncture of the discourse and for this reason not under the header of contemplation of *dharma*s. An inclusion of the hindrances could also be supported from a practical viewpoint, as the cultivation of the awakening factors requires that the hindrances are recognized and then overcome. The two sets are in fact regularly set in opposition to one another in the discourses.

From a strictly comparative perspective, however, only the awakening factors remain as the central modality of contemplation of dharmas. The actual instructions also differ. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel the task is to recognize the presence and absence of each awakening factor, followed by mindfully discerning the conditions

Table 2 Survey of Contemplation of Dharmas

MN 10	MĀ 98	EĀ 12.1
hindrances (1)	sense-spheres (→ 3)	awakening factors (→ 4)
aggregates (2)	hindrances (→ 1)	absorptions
sense-spheres (3)	awakening factors (→ 4)	
awakening factors (4)		
noble truths (5)	(≠ 2, 5)	(≠ 1, 2, 3, 5)

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responsible for its presence or absence. The *Ekottarika-āgama* version instead relates each awakening factor to insight themes. Nevertheless, the three versions can be seen to agree in considering the topic of the awakening factors to be central to contemplation of *dharma*s.

Now the awakening factors, comprising mindfulness, investigation-of-states, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity (or equipoise), are considered to be particularly pertinent to reaching the final goal of early Buddhist soteriology. In fact, their disclosure is presented as a discovery specific to the Buddha himself and thus as an outcome of his own awakening (SN 46.42, SHT VIII 1857, MĀ 58, SĀ 721, EĀ 39.7, and T 38).

This in turn implies that contemplation of *dharma*s comes with an emphasis on applying a central aspect of the Dharma (the teaching of the Buddha) to meditation practice: the cultivation of the awakening factors. In this way, mindfulness meditation can fulfil the chief purpose of the Dharma, which is to lead to awakening. In fact, what the three discourse versions have in common, despite their differences in method for contemplating the awakening factors, is a monitoring of the condition of the mind in such a way that it becomes ready for awakening.

Although a monitoring of the mind and even a discerning of the presence of a hindrance can be part of some MBIs, an overall concern with reaching awakening is clearly outside of their scope. This is only to be expected, given the clinical setting within which the current use of mindfulness for various secular purposes emerged.

In this way, despite some occasional overlap, MBIs do not seem to involve a full cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhāna*s/*smṛtyupasthāna*s. The first of these four has as central elements a contemplation of the body in such a way that its lack of inherent attraction, its insubstantiality, and its mortality become evident. Building on this come the second and third *satipaṭṭhāna*s/*smṛtyupasthāna*s. Based on mindfully attending to the hedonic quality of present experience, here practice proceeds to an emphasis on a basic ethical discernment (evident in the distinction between worldly and unworldly feeling tones) and to discerning states of mind that are with or without defilements (listed together with conditions of the mind that appear to be related to formal meditation).

The meditative progression evident in this way finds its culmination point in a monitoring of the condition of the mind in such a way that awakening can take place. Based on the ability to recognize and overcome the hindrances, this requires in particular a meditative cultivation of the awakening factors, seven qualities singled out for their potential to bring about the breakthrough to liberation.

The Purpose of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*

The impression that the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* come with a strong overall orientation towards awakening, derived from a comparative survey of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two discourse parallels in the Chinese *Āgamas*, finds further confirmation on turning to the objective explicitly associated with such practice. The parallels formulate the purpose of cultivating the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* in the following form:

> This is the direct path for the purification of living beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of distress and displeasure, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nirvāṇa, namely the four establishments of mindfulness.
> (MN 10: *ekāyano ayaṃ … maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā sokaparidevānaṃ samatikkamāya dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya ñāyassa adhigamāya nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*).

> There is a single path for the purification of living beings, for going beyond sorrow and fear, for eradicating distress and affliction, for abandoning weeping and tears, for attaining the right Dharma, namely the four establishments of mindfulness.
> (MĀ 98: 有一道淨眾生, 度憂畏, 滅苦惱, 斷啼哭, 得正法, 謂四念處).

> There is a one-going path for the purification of the actions of living beings, for removing worry and sorrow, for being without afflictions, for attaining great knowledge and wisdom, for accomplishing the realization of Nirvāṇa, namely that one should abandon the five hindrances and attend to the four establishments of mindfulness.
> (EĀ 12.1: 有一入道, 淨眾生行, 除去愁憂, 無有諸惱, 得大智慧, 成泥洹證, 所謂當滅五蓋, 思惟四意止).

The explicit aims of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* practice do not provide an easy fit for current MBIs. In spite of a common concern to alleviate worry and sorrows, MBIs do not have as their chief aim the realization of Nirvāṇa or the attaining of the right Dharma. There is in fact no need to expect that MBIs fully concord with the goals of early Buddhist soteriology. As pointed out by Lindahl (2015, p. 61),

> if contemporary mindfulness is secular, it need not be evaluated based upon its fidelity to traditional Buddhist concepts of … liberation, or awakening … In this sense, 'right mindfulness' might not be right for contemporary mindfulness.

Although it is certainly meaningful to explore Buddhist roots of the current employment of mindfulness, there is indeed no need to expect MBIs to conform fully to the type of

practice that in early Buddhist thought was considered to lead to awakening. Instead, a more suitable precedent for MBIs can be found in instructions on mindful eating (Anālayo 2018), which is an early Buddhist employment of mindfulness with a clear-cut worldly benefit. In fact, the discourses reporting this episode even involve a paid mindfulness instructor. Other precedents can be found in passages among the early Buddhist discourses that show how to face pain with mindfulness (Anālayo 2016). The same body of texts even offers practical advice addressed to patients (AN 5.123 and EĀ 32.8) and nurses (AN 5.124 and EĀ 32.9). Such passages are a better fit for MBIs than instructions on how to reach awakening.

Conclusion

A comparative survey of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthāna*s conveys the impression that the current employment of mindfulness in secular venues like health care, education, etc., in spite of some degree of affinity, does not really qualify as an implementation of the whole set of four establishments of mindfulness. Better precedents for MBIs could be found in early Buddhist instructions on mindful eating and on how to face physical pain with mindfulness.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations
AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 99); SHT, Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden; SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition.

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