

Mindfulness Constructs in Early Buddhism and Theravāda: Another Contribution to the Memory Debate

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Introduction

The present paper, which serves as a reply to Levman (2018), published in the same issue of this journal, starts off with the premise that we need to recognize the existence of different constructs of mindfulness among various Buddhist traditions (as well as, of course, in modern clinical usage). Hence, when speaking of mindfulness in early Buddhism, for example, it needs to be borne in mind that this does not simply equate to Theravāda notions of this quality. Not appreciating this difference can easily obfuscate an accurate appraisal of aspects of a particular construct of mindfulness, such as the question of its relationship to memory. In order to recognize the distinct characteristics of various Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness, adopting the text-historical perspective is vital. Moreover, when examining *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, it needs to be borne in mind that here mindfulness or *sati* cooperates with other mental qualities, in particular with *sampajāna*, clearly knowing. This in turn implies that, rather than simply equating *sati* with *satipaṭṭhāna*, closer examination is required in order to appreciate the precise role and function of mindfulness in this context.

Early Buddhism and Theravāda

With the term “early Buddhism” I refer to approximately the first two centuries in the development of Buddhist doctrine in India, roughly from the time the Buddha would have lived (the exact dating of which is still debated) to the reign of King Aśoka in the third century BCE. The sources for studying this time period are, for the most part, the “early discourses.”

These discourses are found in the four Pāli *Nikāyas* as well as in similar textual collections transmitted by other Buddhist schools and extant in the form of the Chinese *Āgamas*, at times in Sanskrit and Gāndhārī manuscripts, and in a few Tibetan translations. Comparative study of these sources enables formulating informed hypotheses about early stages in Buddhist thought and doctrine (Anālayo 2017a, p. 139, 2017c, p. 43).

The term “Theravāda” I use to designate one particular Buddhist school (Anālayo 2013a). Theravāda emerged as a school with a distinct identity since the time of the spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and today is still extant in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. One of the uniting characteristics of members of the Theravāda tradition is the use of the Pāli language. Aside from the discourses, later commentarial and exegetical activity has also been preserved in this language, which continues to be used today. The viewpoints and notions found in commentarial literature in Pāli can at times differ substantially from the perspective reflected in

the discourses of the four Pāli *Nikāyas* (and their parallels). The Pāli commentaries and exegetical treatises, like the well-known *Visuddhimagga*, clearly reflect a later stage in the evolution of Buddhist thought and are therefore representative of “Theravāda Buddhism,” not of “early Buddhism.”

Mindfulness: Wholesome or Unwholesome?

An example that illustrates the need to differentiate between the Theravāda and early Buddhist perspectives is the basic ethical quality of mindfulness or *sati*. According to early Buddhist thought, mindfulness is a quality that could be right (*sammā*) or wrong (*micchā*). This implies that *sati* can manifest in wholesome or unwholesome ways. According to Theravāda exegesis, however, mindfulness is invariably a wholesome quality (Anālayo 2003, p. 52 n. 31, 2013b, pp. 178–180).

This distinction has repercussions for how the actual practice of mindfulness is conceived. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and

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its parallels, the task is to notice a defilement or a hindrance right at the time it manifests in the mind. According to later Theravāda exegesis, however, since a wholesome and an unwholesome quality cannot simultaneously exist in the same state of mind, one could only be mindful of a defilement a fraction of a moment after it has been present. As long as mindfulness is considered to be invariably wholesome, it cannot be present at the same time a defilement is in the mind.

This example should suffice to show the need to understand each of these two constructs of *sati* on their own. The point I intend to make here is certainly not to dismiss one construct and promote the other. Distinguishing between what is historically earlier and later need not be invested with an implicit value judgement. It can just be a framework of reference to enable a better understanding.

From the viewpoint of the historically later theory of momentariness and its vision of a quick succession of mind-moments that rapidly pass away as soon as they have arisen, the Theravāda construct of mindfulness clearly makes sense. However, it needs to be differentiated from the early Buddhist construct of *sati*, in order to enable a full appreciation of each of these two notions within their historical and doctrinal setting. Ignoring such differences undermines an accurate understanding of each.

Mindfulness and Wisdom

The same need for differentiation applies to other aspects of mindfulness as well. When one of the definitions of *sati* in the Pāli discourses employs the term *nepakka*, for example, we cannot simply rely on Buddhaghosa’s understanding from nearly a millennium later and take this term to be identical to wisdom. In a paper published in the previous issue of this journal, I pointed out that, out of a range of reliable translators of the Pāli discourses, none has ever rendered *nepakka* in the canonical definition of mindfulness as “wisdom” (Anālayo 2018, p. 3). In reply, Levman (2018, p.

1044) raises the criticism that this “leaves out the fact that Buddhaghosa, in his commentary to this *sutta*, also translates *nepakka* as ‘wisdom’ ... and his interpretation is surely just as relevant as these other authors.”

This criticism gives me the impression of a lack of discernment between early Buddhism and Theravāda. The topic of my original paper, which was the starting point of the exchange with Levman, was “early Buddhist mindfulness and memory, the body, and pain” (2016a). From the outset, my concern was to understand this particular construct of mindfulness, which needs to be considered on its own, rather than through the lens of later exegetical tradition.

In the case of the abovementioned definition of mindfulness given in the Pāli discourses, it does not make much sense to understand *nepakka* as wisdom, because this definition speaks of recalling something said or done long ago (Anālayo 2018, p. 3). Such episodic type of memory does not necessarily have a relationship to wisdom. At times, we might recall something rather silly said or done in the distant past and continue with deluded associations related to it. This can hardly be considered a matter of wisdom.

It is only when mindfulness is understood as an intrinsically wholesome quality, regardless of its actual manifestation, that it makes sense to relate it categorically to wisdom. Yet, this is clearly not the position taken in the early Buddhist discourses.

A correlation of the factors of the noble eightfold path with the three trainings in morality, concentration, and wisdom confirms this point. This correlation, found in the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* and its parallels (MN 44; see also Anālayo 2011: p. 279f), does not put “right mindfulness” into the aggregate of wisdom but instead places it in the aggregate of concentration. This makes it clear that, in early Buddhist thought, even right mindfulness is not seen as, in itself, involving wisdom; otherwise, it would have been placed under the heading of wisdom in this discourse.

Memory and the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

Another challenge with conceiving mindfulness as intrinsically wholesome arises in relation to the topic of memory. The Theravāda exegetical tradition recognizes this problem and attempts to explain how come those who have wrong views can still remember (As 250). In his discussion of the explanations provided by the commentators, Ñāṇaponika (1949/1985, p. 69) comments that “we cannot say that these explanations are very satisfactory.” This leads him to propose a more plausible solution to the problem of memory, in that “we can assume that ancient Buddhist psychology ascribed the main share in the process of recollecting to perception (*saññā*).” Perception has the function of matching experienced sense-data with concepts and is a continuously present aspect of the mind, unlike mindfulness. This makes perception a better candidate for a Pāli equivalent to memory.

When Levman (2018, p. 1043) translates the faculty of *sati* in the canonical definition simply as “the faculty of memory,” such equation fails to be convincing. Whether mindfulness is considered intrinsically wholesome or ethically indeterminate, it is not always present in the mind. In order to

find a Pāli counterpart to memory, we need to identify something that is operative in any state of mind.

As already pointed out by T.W. Rhys Davids (1910, p. 322):

Etymologically Sati is Memory. But as happened at the rise of Buddhism to so many other expressions in common use, a new connotation was then attached to the

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word, a connotation that gave a new meaning to it, and renders ‘memory’ a most inadequate and misleading translation.

A century later, Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011, p. 22) concurs:

When devising a terminology that could convey the salient points and practices of his own teaching, the Buddha inevitably had to draw on the vocabulary available to him. To designate the practice that became the main pillar of his meditative system, he chose the word *sati*. But here *sati* no longer means memory ... it would be a fundamental mistake to insist on reading the old meaning of memory into the new context.

The same problem of needing to differentiate between mindfulness and memory holds in relation to *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. Although Levman (2018, p. 1044) grants that “the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* itself does indeed not use verbs of remembering,” he nevertheless asserts that “many of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditative practices are indeed acts of memory.” Of course, during *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, just as when absent-mindedly doing a boring chore, some type of working and semantic memory must be operating. Without a minimum input of concepts and without the ability to continue doing what we have started to do, we would hardly be able to perform any meaningful activity. However, such types of memory cannot be simply equated with *sati* (Anālayo 2016a, p. 1274).

In order to pursue this further, I first leave aside for the time being the comparative perspective based on the Chinese *Āgama* parallels, in order to examine just the Pāli version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* from the viewpoint of the functions it associates with mindfulness. After that, I turn to evaluate the importance of taking into account the Chinese *Āgamas*.

Now *sati* is mentioned only rarely in the actual instructions in the Pāli version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (Anālayo 2013b, p. 36f). It occurs in a part of the discourse that I like to refer to as the “refrain,” which caps off each individual contemplation. The relevant part enjoins that one should be mindful of the body, feelings, etc. just for the sake of knowledge and mindfulness.

In addition, *sati* is mentioned as one of the awakening factors. However, the actual meditative task here is that one should “know,” *pājānati*, the presence or absence of *sati* or any other awakening factor and the conditions related to their presence and absence.

The injunction that one should “know” occurs in each of the individual contemplations listed under the second, third, and fourth *satipaṭṭhāna*. In the case of the first *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplation of the body, other meditative tasks are described besides instances of “knowing.” These are that one should “examine” the anatomical parts and elements of the body and one should “compare” one’s own body to a corpse in stages of decay. Moreover, when being mindful of the breath one should, besides “knowing” long and short breaths, also “experience” the whole body and “calm” bodily activity. In the introduction to these meditative steps concerned with the breath, mindfulness itself features as part of an actual meditative task to be performed. The instructions are that, after having established mindfulness, one should do the following: “mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out.”

Now being mindful of inhalations and exhalations is not an act of memory. Yet, in the Pāli version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, this instruction to breathe in and out mindfully is the one place where *sati* occurs as a practice-instruction in an individual contemplation. This makes it indispensable to test any hypothesis on the role of mindfulness in *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation against this particular meditative task. On such testing, I fail to see how one could take this instruction to mean that, even though “*sati* is not a question of recalling a breath from an earlier time or *dwelling in* past memories; *sati* is recollection with wisdom, that is, recollecting the Buddha’s teaching and their applicability to one’s own personal sufferings and problems and reinterpreting, transforming and extinguishing them through the catalyst of the *buddhadhamma*,” as suggested by Levman (2018, p. 1044).

Being mindful of inhalations and exhalations is something anyone can do without needing to recollect with wisdom the Buddha’s teaching or bringing in the catalyst of the *buddhadhamma*. All it requires is to be told to watch the breath, which in various MBIs is regularly done within a clinical setting that has no explicit relationship to Buddhist doctrine.

Returning to the Pāli version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the discourse describes the collaboration of several mental qualities during *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. Of central importance for my present discussion is “clearly knowing,” *sampajāna*, an adjective etymologically closely related to the recurrent instruction in the actual contemplations that one should “know,” *pajānāti*. Such knowing is responsible for the clear recognition of one’s bodily posture, for example, or else of having a “pleasant” feeling or a mind “with anger.” The instructions explicitly present what one should know by marking it as a quotation, showing that some degree of conceptual input, or even inner verbalization, is required (Anālayo 2017b, p. 21).

In order for this quality of knowing to perform its function, mindfulness lays the groundwork. If I am not aware of my body, feelings, or mental states, I can hardly recognize how my body is positioned, whether I have pleasant feelings, or whether I am angry. But that recognition itself is the task of *sampajāna*, the function of clearly knowing, reflected in the injunction that one should “know,” *pajānāti*. It is such clearly knowing that is instrumental in the arising of wisdom, *paññā*.

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The role of mindfulness in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation could perhaps be compared to clear water used for making a soup. Although there is no soup without water, the flavors of the soup are due to the spices or other ingredients employed, not because of the water on its own. Similarly, although there is no *satipaṭṭhāna* without mindfulness, the different insights resulting from *satipaṭṭhāna* are due to other qualities collaborating with *sati*, especially clearly knowing, and not because of mindfulness on its own.

The confusion that can arise from not recognizing the distinct function of mindfulness in early Buddhist thought can be illustrated with a verse in the *Sutta-nipāta* (Sn 1035), which Norman (1992, 116) translates as follows:

Whatever streams there are in the world ...
their restraint is mindfulness.

Levman (2018, p. 1045) takes this verse to imply that “in this poem *sati* recalls the world obstructed by ignorance and other afflictions, and restrains the streams.” I fail to see an explicit or even implicit relationship to recalling something here at all. As far as I am able to tell, the verse is simply about restraint as a result of mindfulness. The point seems to be merely that, when one is mindful, one is not carried away by the “streams” of reactivity to whatever is taking place.

When Levman (2018, p. 1044) states that “*sati* is recollection with wisdom, that is, recollecting the Buddha’s teaching,” he seems to attribute to *sati* tasks that, in the early Buddhist analysis of the mind, are instead performed by other mental qualities that collaborate with mindfulness but are not identical with it. This holds for *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation and also for the awakening factors, where the factor of investigation-of-phenomena is responsible for generating meditative wisdom, based on the previous establishment of mindfulness. Although mindfulness lays the necessary foundation, it needs the collaboration of other qualities in order to result in wisdom.

Understanding Early Buddhism

Levman (2018, p. 1045) asserts that “scholars are generally agreed that the Pāli canon, while not necessarily preserving the actual words of the Buddha is nevertheless the oldest record we have of his teachings (von Hinüber 1983, p. 9; 2001 §71).” Following up the references given brings to light that the statements by von Hinüber here are concerned with the earliness of the Pāli *language*. This is quite different from the claim that the Pāli canon is the oldest record of the Buddha’s teachings. The earliness of the Pāli language does not mean that the *contents* of the Pāli canon, the final product of centuries of oral transmission, comprising earlier and later texts, must be the oldest record of the Buddha’s teaching.

There is no reason to take the Pāli discourses as invariably earlier than their counterparts preserved in Chinese. In another paper, I have provided a wealth of examples, drawn from just one of the Chinese *Āgamas*, to document instances where the Pāli version must have suffered from textual loss or later addition (Anālayo 2016b).

One example might help to illustrate this. The *Chabbisodhana-sutta* (MN 112), the “Discourse on the Sixfold Purity,” expounds only *five* purities of an arahant. The discrepancy

between title and content has led the Pāli commentary to propose various explanations (Ps IV 94). One of these explanations quotes reciters from India, who suggest that a sixth purity related to nutriment should be added. The *Madhyama-āgama* parallel (MĀ 187) has altogether six purities, and the additional one is precisely the one attributed by the Pāli commentary to the Indian reciters: the nutriments (Anālayo 2008). There can hardly be any doubt that, at some point in the transmission from India to Sri Lanka, the Pāli discourse lost a substantial portion of text, and this portion can be restored by recourse to the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel.

In order to detect such problems of oral transmission, a comparative study of parallel versions of the early discourses is indispensable. Yet, Levman (2018, p. 1045) argues that “the Pāli is nevertheless centuries earlier than the Chinese, the first translations of which date from the second century of the first millennium CE.” As I have pointed out elsewhere (Anālayo 2012, p. 238), the date of translation does not necessarily reflect the earliness or lateness of the original text. For example, the fact that Martin Luther first published a translation of the New Testament and only later translated the whole Bible does not imply that the New Testament must now be earlier than the Old Testament.

In the case of Buddhist texts, the Pāli discourses and their parallels are the final product of centuries of oral transmission. Current research on Gāndhārī manuscripts has made it clear that the process of writing down seems to have taken place in parts of India at approximately the same time as the writing down of the Pāli canon in Sri Lanka. The *Madhyama-āgama*, to stay with my earlier case, was translated into Chinese in 398 CE, based on a written manuscript brought from India (Anālayo 2015, p. 52). As the example provided above would have shown, it does not follow from the date of translation that this collection could not have preserved an earlier version of a particular discourse passage than its Pāli counterpart.

Conclusion

A full appreciation of Buddhist thought and doctrine requires a historical perspective. This holds especially for different constructs of mindfulness proposed in various Buddhist traditions. Each of these constructs can only be understood

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properly when examined within its own particular setting. As far as the functions of mindfulness in early Buddhist thought are concerned, these need to be determined based on a comparative study of the early discourse material rather than viewing the Pāli discourses through the lens of later exegesis. Such procedure will make it clear that *sati* cannot simply be equated with memory. The bringing to mind of various teachings or concepts during *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation is the function of clearly knowing, which operates based on the memory input provided by the aggregate of perception. By receptively attending to present-moment experience as it is, mindfulness itself offers access to the raw data for such insightful processing. Such access is not an act of memory but rather requires restraining the mind from following up reminiscences and recollections related to past experiences.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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

Conflict of Interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

As, *Atthasālinī*; MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama*; MBI, mindfulness-based intervention; MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Ps, *Papañcasūdanī*; Sn, *Sutta-nipāta*.

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