

Open Monitoring and Mindfulness

Bhikkhu Anālayo

The present is a pre-copyedit version (with pagination added in square brackets in accordance with the original) of an article published in 2018 under the above title in *Mindfulness*, 10.7: 1437–1442. The final version is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01181-z>

Abstract:

This article explores the relationship of mindfulness to open monitoring in texts reflecting early Buddhist thought, extant in Pāli discourses and their Chinese parallels. The first of the discourses studied is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which together with its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels reflects an emphasis on open monitoring rather than on establishing a narrow focus. The second discourse commends a shift of practice toward a more directed form of meditation if the cultivation of mindfulness in the form of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* should lead to distraction or sluggishness. The third discourse concerns the cultivation of mindfulness in relation to sensory experience in situations outside of formal meditation. Such cultivation is explicitly related to the experience of a boundless mental condition, reflecting the breadth of mind that appears to be characteristic of the early Buddhist conception of mindfulness when cultivated on its own, that is, when, during formal meditation or daily life practice, full prominence is given to mindfulness itself.

Key words:

Breadth of mind; concentration; embodiment; focused attention; open monitoring; *nimitta*; *samādhi*; *sati*; sense-restraint

Introduction

In early Buddhist thought, an expression referring to the first period in the history of Buddhism from about the 5th to the 3rd century BCE (Anālayo 2012), mindfulness cultivated on its own tends to take the form of a receptive and uninvolved monitoring of what is taking place (Anālayo 2019c). In the case of mindfulness of breathing, for example, the considerable degree of focus that often comes with contemporary instructions for this type of meditation appears to be the result of later developments. The early discourses instead reflect an approach to mindfulness of breathing that gives primacy to an open monitoring rather than to cultivating an exclusive focus (Anālayo 2019d). Although some degree of focus clearly has its place, the main modality of attention for progressing through the sixteen steps entails combining different tasks and hence requires a more open monitoring type of approach. This invites an exploration of the of early Buddhist descriptions of other mindfulness practices in order to discern if these also give prominence to open monitoring as against exclusive focusing.

Formal Mindfulness Practice and Open Monitoring

The degree to which open monitoring is relevant to the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* in general can be ascertained with the help of a survey of the exercises that are common to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels, reflecting an early formulation of such practice (Anālayo 2013). The contemplations found in each of the three parallels cover three body contemplations (anatomical parts, elements, corpse in decay) as well as contemplation of feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas (in terms of the awakening factors).

The first body contemplation requires discerning that the body is made up of different anatomical parts. A closer look at the relevant instructions reveals the degree to which this exercise requires a broader survey of various objects or else an exclusive focus on a single object:

In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, bowels, mesentery, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.

(MN 10: *atthi imasmiṃ kāye kesā lomā nakhā dantā taco maṃsaṃ nahāru aṭṭhi aṭṭhimiñjaṃ vakkam*)

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hadayaṃ yakanam kilomakam pihakam papphasam antam antagunam udariyam karisam pittam semham pubbo lohitaṃ sedo medo assu vasā kheḷo siṅghānikā lasikā muttan ti).

Within this body of mine there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, rough and smooth epidermis, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, heart, kidneys, liver, lungs, large intestine, small intestine, spleen, stomach, lumps of faeces, brain and brain stem, tears, sweat, saliva, pus, blood, fat, marrow, mucus, phlegm, and urine.

(MĀ 98: 我此身中有髮, 髦, 爪, 齒, 龜細薄膚, 皮, 肉, 筋, 骨, 心, 腎, 肝, 肺, 大腸, 小腸, 脾, 胃, 搏糞, 腦及腦根, 淚, 汗, 涕唾, 膿, 血, 肪, 髓, 涎, 痰, 小便; adopting the variant 痰 instead of 膽).

One contemplates that in this body there are body hairs, head hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, brain, fat, intestines, stomach, heart, liver, spleen, kidneys; one contemplates and knows them all. [There are also] faeces, urine, [whatever else] is produced by digestion in the two receptacles, tears in the eyes, spittle, mucus, blood in the veins, fat, and gall.

(EĀ 12.1: 觀此身有毛, 髮, 爪, 齒, 皮, 肉, 筋, 骨, 髓, 腦, 脂膏, 腸, 胃, 心, 肝, 脾, 腎之屬, 皆悉觀知. 屎, 尿, 生熟二藏, 目淚, 唾, 涕, 血脈, 肪, 膽).

The contemplation described is a survey of the body as a whole. It does not require maintaining a focus on any of these individual parts, but much rather requires an overview of all of these as together constituting the body.

The same applies to the second body contemplation, which involves a similar survey of the constitution of the body, but from the viewpoint of its material elements. The third body

contemplation lists different stages of decay of a corpse, which serve to drive home the fact that one's own body is going to fall apart just the same. Here the monitoring quality of the practice stands out even more strongly, as one not only contemplates different stages of decay but also interrelates the condition of another's body to one's own body.

The second *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* requires contemplating different feeling tones in terms of these being experienced as pleasant, painful, or neutral. These three affective tonalities are further distinguished into worldly and unworldly types, a distinction that appears to be related to the ethical context within which a particular feeling tone has arisen (Anālayo 2019b). A worldly pleasant feeling, for example, can arise in relation to lustful sensual indulgence. An example for its unworldly counterpart would be forms of joy and happiness that are unrelated to lust and sensual gratification.

Similar to the listings of different anatomical parts or material elements, the contemplation described is not about cultivating an exclusive focus on a particular feeling tone. Instead, practice of the second *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* requires a continuous monitoring of the hedonic quality of experience in order to be able to discern whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (and, further, whether is worldly or unworldly).

The third *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* turns to different conditions of the mind. A consultation of the full instruction helps to ascertain what modality of attention is involved:

One knows a mind with lust to be 'a mind with lust'; or one knows a mind without lust to be 'a mind without lust'; or one knows a mind with anger ... without anger ... with delusion ... without delusion ... contracted ... distracted ... become great ... not become great ... surpassable ... unsurpassable ... concentrated ... not concentrated ... liberated ... not liberated to be 'a not liberated mind.'

(MN 10: *sarāgaṃ vā cittaṃ: sarāgaṃ cittaṃ ti pajānāti, vītarāgaṃ vā cittaṃ: vītarāgaṃ cittaṃ ti pajānāti, sadosaṃ, vītadosaṃ, samohaṃ, vītamohaṃ, saṅkhittaṃ, vikkhittaṃ, mahaggataṃ, amahaggataṃ, sa-uttaraṃ, anuttaraṃ, samāhitaṃ, asamāhitaṃ, vimuttaṃ, avimuttaṃ vā cittaṃ: avimuttaṃ cittaṃ ti pajānāti*).

The mind being with sensual desire, one knows, as it really is, that the mind is with sensual desire; the mind being without sensual desire, one knows, as it really is, that the mind is without sensual desire; the mind being with anger ... without anger ... with delusion ... without delusion ... defiled ... undefiled ... contracted ... distracted ... inferior ... superior ... narrow ... great ... cultivated ... uncultivated ... concentrated ... not concentrated... not liberated, one knows, as it really is, that the mind is not liberated; the mind being liberated, one knows, as it really is, that the mind is liberated.

(MĀ 98: 有欲心, 知有欲心如真, 無欲心, 知無欲心如真, 有恚, 無恚, 有癡, 無癡, 有穢污, 無穢污, 有合, 有散, 有下, 有高, 有小, 有大, 修, 不修, 定, 不定, 有不解脫心知不解脫心如真, 有解脫心知解脫心如真).

The mind being with sensual craving, one then knows of oneself that the mind is with sensual craving; the mind being without sensual craving, one also knows of oneself that the mind is without sensual craving. The mind being with anger ... without anger ... with delusion ...

without delusion ... with thoughts of craving ... without thoughts of craving ... reaching an attainment ... not reaching an attainment ... distracted ... undistracted ... scattered ... not scattered ... pervasive ... not pervasive ... great ... not great ... boundless ... not boundless ... concentrated ... unconcentrated ... as yet unliberated ... the mind being already liberated, one knows of oneself that the mind is already liberated.

(EĀ 12.1: 有愛欲心, 便自覺知有愛欲心; 無愛欲心, 亦自覺知無愛欲心; 有瞋恚 ... 無瞋恚 ... 有愚癡 ... 無愚癡 ... 有

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愛念 ... 無愛念 ... 有受人 ... 無受人 ... 有亂 ... 無亂 ... 有散落 ... 無散落 ... 有普遍 ... 無普遍 ... 有大 ... 無大 ... 有無量 ... 無無量 ... 有三昧 ... 無三昧 ... 未解脫 ... 已解脫心, 便自覺知已解脫心; adopting a variant reading without a reference to 念 in relation to 有亂, in keeping with the formulation found for 無亂).

The list of different mental states in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels makes it indubitably clear that the modality of attention required for contemplation of the mind is fully in keeping with the previously surveyed exercises. Rather than requiring a focus on one particular item to the exclusion of others, the third *satipaṭṭhāna/smr̥tyupasthāna* involves a monitoring of the condition of the mind, however it may manifest, in order to discern its present condition.

In the case of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna/smr̥tyupasthāna* of contemplation of dharmas, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two parallels in the Chinese *Āgamas* concord on one contemplation, which involves the seven awakening factors:

mindfulness,
investigation-of-dharmas,
energy,
joy,
tranquility,
concentration,
equipoise,

Although the actual instructions differ among the three versions (Anālayo 2019a), the fact that they all involve these seven distinct factors already suffices to show that the task here is also not the cultivation of an exclusive focus. Instead, the practice of this contemplation requires monitoring the presence or absence of different mental factors. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, such monitoring takes the form of exploring the conditions responsible for the arousing and maintenance of each of these seven awakening factors. In the *Ekottarika-āgama* version the practice of this particular contemplation instead requires combining each of these seven awakening factors with insight-related meditative themes (in addition to insight itself, these are dispassion, cessation, and the discarding of bad mental states).

In this way, a survey of the practices found in common between the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels shows that the principle mode of meditation presented in these

texts requires a monitoring and overseeing of different aspects of experience through mindfulness, rather than the cultivation of an exclusive focus. This is in line with the modality of attention evident in the instructions on mindfulness of breathing in sixteen steps, which in fact forms a particular implementation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*.

Directed and Undirected Forms of Meditation

A distinction between *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* practice and a more focused approach to meditation emerges in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel. The recommendation given in both versions is that one should change one's mode of meditation if, during the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*, the mind becomes distracted or sluggish and the body feverish or drowsy. Once that shift of practice has fulfilled its purpose, the cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness can be resumed. The two parallel versions describe the basic situation that calls for such an adjustment in the following ways:

A monastic dwells contemplating the body in regard to the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from greedy desire and discontent with regard to the world. While dwelling contemplating the body in regard to the body, with the body as the object there arises a feverishness of the body, or a sluggishness of the mind, or the mind becomes externally distracted. That monastic should direct the mind towards some inspiring mark.

(SN 47.10: *bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. tassa kāye kāyānupassino viharato kāyārammaṇo vā uppajjati kāyasmim̐ pariḷāho, cetaso vā līnattaṃ, bahiddhā vā cittaṃ vikkhipati. tena ... bhikkhunā kismiñcid eva pasādanīye nimitte cittaṃ paṇidahitabbaṃ*).

Suppose a monastic is established in mindfully contemplating the body as a body. Having become established in such mindful contemplation of the body as a body, suppose the body is affected by drowsiness and the mental factors are sluggish. That monastic should arouse inspired confidence by taking hold of an inspiring mark.

(SĀ 615: 若比丘於身身觀念住. 於彼身身觀念住已, 若身耽睡, 心法懈怠. 彼比丘當起淨信, 取於淨相).

A minor difference between the two parallels is that the second excerpt, taken from the *Samyukta-āgama* (SĀ 615), mentions “sluggishness” instead of “distraction.” This difference is without further consequences for evaluating the gist of the instruction, as the preceding passage in the same discourse commends that one should “train in being established in the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* with a mind that is well collected” (學四念處善繫心住), since “a distracted mind does not become liberated” (散亂心不解脫). This makes it clear that the *Samyukta-āgama* version also considers distraction to be a central problem, even though this is not explicitly mentioned in the extract translated above.

The two versions agree in referring in the present context to a “mark” (*nimitta*/相/*mtshan ma*), further qualified as being of an “inspiring” nature. The Pāli and Sanskrit term *nimitta* conveys nuances of a “condition” in general as well as of the distinctive “feature” of something that is being cognized

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(Anālayo 2003). The two meanings overlap in the case of recognizing a friend seen at a distance, for example, as the “distinct features” of the person in question are precisely the “condition” for the ability to recognize him or her.

In the present context, the idea of an inspiring “mark” stands for something that can serve as a “condition” for arousing gladness, joy, tranquility and happiness, which eventually result in the mind gaining concentration (*samādhi*/定 or 三昧/*ting nge 'dzin*):

The mind becomes concentrated. One reflects thus: ‘The purpose for which I directed the mind, that purpose has been achieved. Let me now withdraw from it.’

(SN 47.10: *cittaṃ samādhīyati. so iti paṭisañcikkhati: yassa khvāhaṃ atthāya cittaṃ paṇidahim, so me attho abhinipphanno. handa dāni paṭisaṃharāmī ti*).

The mind becomes concentrated. The mind being concentrated, the noble disciple should undertake this training: ‘It is for this purpose that I took hold of the mind that had been scattered externally, to make it become quiet.’

(SĀ 615: 其心則定. 心定者, 聖弟子當作是學: 我於此義外散之心攝, 令休息).

The reference in the second excerpt to the mind being scattered externally confirms the point made above, in that in the *Samyukta-āgama* version the issue at stake is also countering the mind’s distraction by a skillful shift of practice.

The first of the two excerpts translated here, which reflects the Pāli version (SN 47.10), explicitly describes how to proceed once it has become clear that the temporary shift of practice has fulfilled its purpose. With concentration gained, it becomes possible to withdraw the mind and return to the practice that in both versions formed the starting point, namely the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smrtyupasthāna* of contemplating the body.

The two versions agree that what ensues involves a mental condition free from two mental factors that characterize the first absorption (which can also be experienced at levels of the mind that fall short of absorption attainment) and a happy dwelling in mindfulness:

One understands: ‘Being without application and its sustaining, I am internally mindful and happy.’

(SN 47.10: *avitakkomhi avicāro ajjhataṃ satimā sukhamasmī ti pajānāti*).

Without [applied] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, I am equanimously and mindfully established in happiness.

(SĀ 615: 無覺無觀, 捨念樂住).

The same procedure applies to the other three *satipaṭṭhānas/smrtyupasthānas*, which involve contemplation of feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas.

The Pāli version points out that the earlier shift to a different mode of practice was actually a shift towards a “directed meditation,” *paṇidhāya bhāvanā*. This stands in contrast to “undirected meditation,” *apaṇidhāya bhāvanā*, which in the Pāli version finds exemplification in *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation with a mind that is not directed externally (that is, not directed toward an inspiring mark).

Although this part of the Pāli version has no parallel in the *Samyukta-āgama* discourse, the basic distinction drawn in this way would apply to the recommendation given in both versions. The two discourses clearly agree in commending a form of meditation that involves directing attention to an inspiring sign to cultivate concentration in case the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation runs into obstacles, such as mental distraction or sluggishness (or feverishness of the body).

In this way, both versions distinguish between *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* practice and the cultivation of concentration. Although mindfulness has of course an important role to play in the very cultivation of concentration, the above presentation implies that *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* and the cultivation of concentration by taking up an inspiring mark are nevertheless different modes of mental cultivation. This is what makes it possible to conceive of a shift of practice from the one to the other in the way described above. At the same time, however, the purpose of the entire description is of course to show how these two modalities of meditation practice can be skillfully interrelated.

In relation to the Pāli version, Ṭhānissaro (2012, p. 112) argued that, “instead of drawing a distinction between mindfulness and concentration, it’s giving advice on how to use mindfulness to bring the mind to right concentration in different situations.” This suggestion does not square too well with the terminology employed in the Pāli discourse itself, which does not mention “right concentration” for either of the two approaches it depicts. This makes it hard to see how they could both be summarized as having “right concentration” as their final purpose, especially if such right concentration is equated with the attainment of the four absorptions.

The description of “directed meditation” employs the expression *cittaṃ samādhīyati*, “the mind becomes concentrated.” In contrast, the “undirected meditation” has no reference at all to concentration, *samādhi*. Instead, it mentions each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*. These correspond to the seventh path factor of “right mindfulness” rather than to the eighth path factor of “right concentration.”

The basic distinction that emerges in this way does reflect a contrast between undirected *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* meditation, characterized by open monitoring, and the cultivation of concentration by “directing” the mind in a particular way, here especially by focusing on an inspiring mark.

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Mindfulness in Daily Life and Breadth of Mind

The potential of learning to oversee different aspects of experience through mindfulness applies to formal *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* practice and to daily life situations. In such a setting, an exclusive focus on only one particular aspect of the situation at hand could easily lead to a narrow vision that misses out the overall picture, as a result of which the mind can more easily get caught up in reactivity.

In early Buddhist thought, the need to apply mindfulness to various situations that are not confined to formal practice periods finds expression in passages that relate mindfulness to experiences at any of the sense-doors. The input that arrives through the sense-doors somehow needs to be managed in order to avoid that anything seen, heard, or cognized triggers unwholesome reactions in the mind. At the same time, in order to be able to function in the outside world it is not possible to shut down and just ignore what is taking place externally. The way to balance these two requirements lies precisely in the cultivation of mindfulness.

The way the ordinary and untrained mind can react to sensory input finds description in the following passage, taken from the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta* and its Chinese *Āgama* parallel:

Having seen a form with the eye, one becomes infatuated with pleasing forms and irritated with unpleasing forms, dwelling with mindfulness of the body unestablished and with a limited mind.

(MN 38: *so cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā piyarūpe rūpe sārājati, appiyarūpe rūpe byāpajati, anupaṭṭhitakāyasati ca viharati parittacetaso*).

On seeing a form with the eye, one delights in and becomes attached to beautiful forms and detests ugly forms, not establishing mindfulness of the body and having a limited mind.

(MĀ 201: 彼眼見色, 樂著好色, 憎惡惡色, 不立身念少心).

The two parallels apply the same pattern to the other sense organs of the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind itself. In each case, what is experienced leads to reactions by way of liking and disliking, which have free rein as mindfulness has not been established and the mind is in a limited or narrow condition. One is caught up in a tunnel vision of a particular aspect of experience, which leads to reactivity that in turn reinforces the same tunnel vision. All of this takes place in the absence of mindfulness and hence without being clearly noticed.

The situation changes once mindfulness is established, which in the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta* and its parallel takes the form of mindfulness of the body in particular:

Having seen a form with the eye, one does not become infatuated with pleasing forms and does not become irritated with unpleasing forms, dwelling with mindfulness of the body established and with a boundless mind.

(MN 38: *so cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā piyarūpe rūpe na sārājati, appiyarūpe rūpe na byāpajati, upaṭṭhitakāyasati ca viharati appamāṇacetaso*).

On seeing a form with the eye, one does not delight in or become attached to beautiful forms and does not detest ugly forms, establishing mindfulness of the body and having a boundless mind.

(MĀ 201: 彼眼見色, 於好色而不樂著, 於惡色而不憎惡, 立身念無量心).

The same description applies to the other senses. In the present context, the idea of mindfulness of the body can fruitfully be understood to refer to a form of proprioceptive awareness of the body as a whole. On this understanding, the type of mindfulness that leads to the absence of reactivity is rooted in the presence of the body and its spatial placing in the nearby surrounding area. In other words, the commendable form of practice here does not require an all-out focus on the body to the exclusion of anything else. Instead, the point is rather a rooting of mindfulness in the presence of the body in such a way that one is able to remain openly receptive to the whole of the situation surrounding the body.

Mindfully monitoring how the body is placed and how it interrelates with aspects of the surroundings indeed relate naturally to a mind that is boundless rather than limited. Such breadth of the attentional field would also enable withstanding the pull of a particular sensory experience towards dominating the whole of one's attention and thereby triggering the resultant tunnel vision. Instead, with a stance of broad and open receptivity, one remains mindfully aware of the whole of the situation and in this manner is able to forestall the arising of reactions of liking and disliking in relation to sensory experiences.

It is noteworthy that the two versions agree on referring to the resultant mental condition as a “boundless state of mind” (*appamāṇacetasa*/無量心). The term employed here is used regularly in the early discourses to qualify the divine abodes, *brahmavihāra*. This qualification confirms that the cultivation of mindfulness on its own (here in particular mindfulness of the body) leads to a broad state of mind rather than to a narrow focus.

Needless to say, this does not mean that mindfulness cannot be part of a focused condition of the mind. In fact, even concentrating on an inspiring mark, taken up in the second of the passages studied here, requires some degree of mindfulness. But in such practice mindfulness plays a secondary role. When it comes to mindfulness cultivated on its own, that is, when during formal meditation or daily life practice prominence is given to mindfulness itself, then this can be expected to result in a broad state of mind that enables an open monitoring of what is taking place.

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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 he has no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 99); SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition.

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