

Overeating and Mindfulness in Ancient India

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Abstract

Reviews of relevant research point to the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in reducing tendencies toward overeating and in leading to weight-reduction. In this article I present an early Buddhist perspective on the potential of mindfulness practice in this respect, based on examining a discourse that reports the Buddha himself giving instructions on mindful eating to a local king. The discourse in question shows that the current employment of mindfulness for such purposes is not a recent innovation but rather has an antecedent in early Buddhist texts. I also relate a recent model of three steps for reducing eating disorders to the early Buddhist teaching on how seeing the gratification and the disadvantage can lead to release from craving-dominated ways of behavior.

Key words:

Binge eating, Craving, Early Buddhism, Mindfulness, Overeating, Weight reduction

Mindful Eating

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) appear to be effective in reducing tendencies toward overeating (Godfrey, Gallo & Afari 2014, Godsey 2013, Katterman et al. 2014, O'Reilly et al. 2014, Wanden-Berghe, Sanz-Valero, & Wanden-Berghe 2011). A basic problem with overeating is that “many obese individuals have lost the ability to recognize or respond to internal cues of hunger, taste, satiety, and fullness” (Dalen et al. 2010, p. 263). Hence, “increasing mindful awareness of internal experiences and automatic patterns related to eating, emotion regulation, and self-acceptance may help to reduce problematic eating behaviour” (Alberts, Thewissen & Raes 2012, p. 850). In this way, “mindfulness training affords the skills to attend to negative feelings and accept them instead of acting on the impulse to immediately suppress them by eating, ultimately leading to decreased urges to emotionally over-eat” (O'Reilly et al. 2014, p. 457). In other words, “mindful attention while eating facilitates reductions in the frequency of binge and compulsive eating as well as the quantity of food eaten on these occasions. This may result from increased sensitivity to interoceptive cues” (Mason et al. 2016b, p. 210). Moreover, Mason et al. (2016a, p. 91) reasoned that “mindfulness may be helpful in beginning to address *how* to cope with the implementation of lifestyle changes that promote weight loss.”

However, a study by Kearney (2012, p. 413) showed “no evidence that participation in MBSR was associated with beneficial changes in eating through reductions in disinhibited eating or significant changes in dietary intake.” The finding was based on instructions given in line with a

standard MBSR course that were not modified in any way to focus on eating-related disorders. This suggests that perhaps “an intervention without a focus on eating meditations was insufficient to produce a measurable change in eating behaviors” (Kearney 2012, p. 418). In relation to weight loss in particular, Daubenmier et al. (2016) found that the effect of MBIs varied considerably according to the ability of the mindfulness instructor. This might imply that precisely *how* mindfulness is taught and applied influences its effect on eating disorders.

Thus it seems that, for mindfulness training to be an effective intervention for eating disorders, it needs to be specifically related to the condition, rather than just being taught in general, and ideally by a qualified instructor. One example of establishing the appropriate context and integrating it with other techniques would be “mindfulness-based eating awareness training” (Kristeller & Wolever 2011; Kristeller, Wolever & Sheets 2014). Another strategy to consider is that of targeting specific populations, such as, for example, those who frequently eat out, offering them a training in “mindful restaurant eating” (Timmermann & Brown 2012).

In order to appreciate exactly how mindfulness training can effectively treat eating disorders, of particular interest to my

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discussion here is a model applied by Mason et al. to craving-related eating. According to their basic premise, “when someone is ‘being mindful,’ the attitudinal quality of not judging and allowing their experience to unfold with curiosity rather than trying to control it helps them not be pushed or pulled by positive and negative affective states” (2017, p. 161). Based on this premise, they developed a model consisting of three distinct core steps as follows: “The first step focuses on increasing awareness of one’s habitual behaviour ... the second step is clearly seeing the outcomes that follow from enacting a given habit ... the third step is learning to exist with, rather than distract oneself from, the experience of craving” (2017, p. 161).

Beccia et al. (2020) expressed the same idea in terms of three “gears,” understood as building on each other in a sequential manner, similar to the gears in a car. These three gears are as follows:

- (1) *increasing awareness*, or recognizing and observing one’s habitual behavior “loops”,
- (2) *evaluating outcomes*, or becoming aware of all results of these habits, and
- (3) *co-existing with craving*, or adopting a judgement-free, curiosity-based observation of these habits, resulting in a decoupling of craving and resultant behavior.

I will come back to these three core steps, or gears, in a later part of this article, after having explored early Buddhist perspectives on overeating.

The Buddha’s advice to King Pasenadi

Overeating is of course not an exclusively modern-day problem; already the early Buddhist discourses (Anālayo 2015), reflecting Buddhist thought from a time period perhaps between the 5th to 3rd century BCE (Anālayo 2012), offer advice on this topic. An instance of such advice is found in a Pāli discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* with parallels in two *Samyukta-āgama*

collections extant in Chinese translation. The narrative setting of the advice involves a local king and disciple of the Buddha by the name of Pasenadi who comes to visit the Buddha. The Pāli version reports that the king had seriously overeaten, the Chinese versions describe him gasping for breath due to his fatness. Seeing the king's physical condition, the Buddha delivers a teaching in verse form on the need to be mindful of moderation with food. King Pasenadi requests a young man present on this occasion to memorize this verse and recite it every time the king is about to take a meal, offering him a regular pay for this service. As a result of being regularly reminded of the need to be mindful when eating, the king overcomes his tendency to overeat and gradually loses weight.

Here is a translation of the three versions of the verse containing the actual advice on mindfulness and food moderation, presented together with the relevant Pāli and Chinese originals (translations throughout are my own):

People who are constantly mindful
 Know their measure with the food they have gotten.
 Their feelings become attenuated;
 They age slowly and guard their longevity.
 (SN 3.13: *manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane; tanu tassa bhavanti vedanā, saṅikaṃ jīrati āyu pālayan ti*).

People should collect themselves with mindfulness,
 Knowing their measure with any food.
 This then decreases their feelings;
 They digest easily and guard their longevity.
 (SĀ 1150: 人當自繫念, 每食知節量, 是則諸受薄, 安消而保壽).

People should constantly recollect by themselves with mindfulness
 That on getting food and drink they should know their measure.
 Their body will be at ease, their painful feelings few;
 They digest properly and guard their longevity.
 (SĀ² 73: 夫人常當自憶念, 若得飲食應知量, 身體輕便受苦少, 正得消化護命長).

Mindfulness is clearly central here; in fact, the first and the third versions emphasize the need for being “constantly” mindful. This applies very well to the situation of overeating, as to know one's measure with food requires at least some continuity of mindful observation. Only through such continuity will it be possible to recognize the point at which enough has been eaten and one's “measure” has been reached.

Implementing such training in mindfulness will improve one's health. The two Chinese versions express this by pointing to improvements in digestion, whereas the Pāli version speaks of aging slowly. The three versions agree that mindful eating ensures that one's lifespan is not shortened, a suggestion that, in view of the detrimental effects of overeating on the condition of one's body, hardly requires any further comment.

The benefits mentioned in the three versions are of additional significance in that they show that already in the ancient Indian setting instructions on mindfulness were delivered with a clear aim at ordinary health benefits. This can be considered to provide, to some extent, a precedent for modern MBIs that are similarly concerned with improvements in physical well-being.

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The three versions relate this practice of mindfulness to a diminishing of feelings, which according to the last version are painful feelings in particular. The same can safely be assumed to be implicit in the other two versions, as it is with painful feelings that a lessening of feelings will be experienced as advantageous. In its Buddhist usage, the term “feeling”, *vedanā*, refers to the hedonic or affective tonality of experience in terms of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It does not refer to emotions.

For a better appreciation of the point made in the above passages in relation to feelings, in the next part of this article I turn to a food reflection that also brings in the topic of feeling.

Monastic Reflection on Food

The standard food reflection enjoined in early Buddhist texts is addressed in particular to monastics who live a mendicant life, so with this example I move from advice given to a lay person to instructions given to monastic disciples. A description of the type of reflection a monastic should cultivate when partaking of food can be found, for example, in a Pāli discourse (MN 2), which has parallels in the Chinese *Āgamas* and in a discourse-quotation extant in Tibetan (Anālayo 2011, p. 31).

The Pāli discourse recommends that a monastic should partake of food with wise reflection, keeping in mind that one eats not for the sake of entertainment but only for the maintenance of the body and as a support for one’s spiritual life. This could be considered a practical implementation of right intention, the second factor in the noble eightfold path (Kristeller and Jones 2006). The standard food reflection next brings in the topic of feelings and then concludes by stating that one will be blameless and at ease by taking one’s meal in this reflective manner.

Here are translations of the section in this food reflection concerning feelings, taken from four of the parallel versions, which clarifies the purpose of knowing one’s measure with food as follows:

Thus I shall terminate old [types of] feeling and not give rise to new [types of] feeling.
(MN 2: *iti purāṇañ ca vedanaṃ paṭihāṅkhāmi navañ ca vedanaṃ na uppādessāmi*).

Wishing to cause the abandoning of old feelings and not to bring about the arising of new feelings.
(MĀ 10: 欲令故病斷, 新病不生故).

Causing old feelings to get dispatched and new feelings not to arise.
(EĀ 40.6: 使故痛得差, 新者不生).

Removing old feelings and [not] creating new feelings.

(Up 2069: *tshor ba rnying pa rnam bsal zhing, tshor ba gsar pa bskyed par bya ba*).

The reference to old and new feelings, found similarly in the parallels translated above, requires some interpretation. As the different discourse versions do not offer additional explanation, later exegetical works can be consulted for any perspective they might offer on the implication of the two types of feeling mentioned in the standard reflection on food.

The *Śrāvakabhūmi*, which is part of an important encyclopedic work of the Yogācāra tradition, relates both types of feeling to improper eating (Shukla 1973, p. 92). By taking food in proper measure, one overcomes any afflictions caused by previous improper intake of food, these being the old feelings mentioned, and one avoids new feelings of indigestion.

However, according to one of two alternative explanations given in a central exegetical treatise of the Theravāda tradition, the *Visuddhimagga*, the reference to old feelings denotes the experiencing of hunger; only new feelings are the result of overeating (Vism 32). The same work offers vivid illustrations of such new feelings, depicting how certain brahmins might overeat to the extent that they need help standing up, their clothes no longer meet, they roll on the ground, crows peck from their mouths, and eventually they might throw up what they had earlier gobbled down. Clearly, the problems of overeating were already well known in ancient India.

Based on the additional information provided in the *Śrāvakabhūmi* and the *Visuddhimagga*, the reference to old and new feelings in the standard food reflection could in turn be related to the notion of diminishing feelings in the instruction to King Pasenadi. In practical terms, the instruction seems to imply that, while taking his meal, the king should be continuously mindful of the feelings he experiences. To begin with, he might note the unpleasant feelings of his present hunger (following the *Visuddhimagga*) and perhaps also recall how former overeating led to equally unpleasant feelings (following the *Śrāvakabhūmi*). Then, he should mindfully note how his present feelings caused by hunger gradually diminish until he realizes that he has had enough food. In this way, he learns to avoid the painful feelings that would result if he were to continue to eat beyond the point when his hunger has already been appeased. By overcoming old feelings of the unpleasant type without giving rise to new ones of the same type, he can achieve an overall diminishing of such feelings. Working mindfully with feelings in this way can lead to health improvements. As already mentioned above, such concerns provide an ancient Indian precedent for current usage of mindfulness in a clinical setting.

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Gratification, Disadvantage, and Release

Another ancient Indian precedent can be found for the idea of three stages that help overcome craving-related disorders, such as overeating. The description of these three is to some degree comparable to an aspect of the early Buddhist teachings that involves these three dimensions:

- 1) gratification (Pāli *assāda*, Sanskrit *āsvāda*, Chinese 味, Tibetan *ro myong ba*)
- 2) disadvantage (*ādīnava*, *ādīnava*, 患, *nyes dmigs*)

3) release (*nissaraṇa*, *niḥsaraṇa*, 出要, *ngeṣ par 'byung ba*)

The idea is that, in order to find release or be free from behavioral patterns of clinging that cause “stress” (*dukkha*, *duḥkha*, 苦, *sdug bsngal*), one needs to recognize both the gratification derived from such behavior and its disadvantages. In this way, recognition (1) leads on to realizing the repercussions (2), and the resultant understanding facilitates a gradual emerging from craving-driven compulsive reactivity (3).

A discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its Chinese parallel agree in relating the Buddha’s awakening, whereby he completely eradicated craving, to his penetrative insight into the gratification, disadvantage, and release in regard to feeling (SN 36.24 and SĀ 475). In other words, here complete freedom from craving stands in a close relationship to liberating insight into these three dimensions of feelings. Another discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its Chinese parallel report the Buddha stating that, without having understood the gratification, disadvantage, and release in relation to the five aggregates of clinging (the second of which is precisely feeling), he could not have claimed to be awakened (SN 22.26 and SĀ 14).

Such passages reflect the importance accorded to these three aspects in early Buddhist soteriology. They also serve as a reminder that the final purpose of such teachings is the complete destruction of all types of craving through the realization of awakening. At the same time, the instruction on mindfulness to King Pasenadi does show an unmistakable concern with mundane health benefits like long life and aging slowly or else good digestion. This makes it fair to apply teachings like the triad of gratification, disadvantage, and release to ordinary situations like overeating and other MBI applications.

The relevant principles concerning the first two aspects of “gratification” and “disadvantage” can be fleshed out with the help of a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its parallels in Sanskrit and Chinese. These proceed as follows:

Monastics, craving grows for one who dwells contemplating the gratification in things that can be clung to ... Monastics, craving ceases for one who dwells contemplating the disadvantage in things that can be clung to.

(SN 12.52: *upādānīyesu, bhikkhave, dhammesu assādānupassino viharato taṇhā pavaḍḍhati ... upādānīyesu, bhikkhave, dhammesu ādīnavānupassino viharato taṇhā nirujjhati*).

Craving increases for one who dwells contemplating the gratification in things that can be clung to ... craving ceases for one who dwells contemplating things that can be clung to as impermanent, contemplating their disappearing, contemplating their fading away, contemplating their cessation, contemplating their relinquishment.

(Tripāṭhī 1962, pp. 91 and 93: *upādānīyeṣu dharmeṣv āsvādānudarśino viharatas tṛṣṇā pravardhate ... upādānīyeṣu dharmeṣv anityānudarśino vibhavānudarśino virāgānudarśino nirodhānudarśinaḥ pratiniḥsargānudarśinas tṛṣṇā nirudhyate*).

Being attached to the gratification in things that [can be] clung to, the mind, being bound by attachment, is worried and craving increases ... contemplating things that [can be] clung to as

impermanent, as arising and passing away, as fading away, as ceasing, as being relinquished, the mind is not worried or bound by attachment, and craving ceases.

(SĀ 286: 於所取法味著, 顧念心縛著, 增其愛 ... 於所取法觀察無常, 生滅, 離欲, 滅盡, 捨離, 心不顧念縛著, 愛則滅).

Even though recognizing the gratification is clearly a first step, seeing only the gratification would eventually result in an increase of craving, which in all three versions, in a part not translated here, then leads to the conditioned genesis of *dukkha* (via the intervening links in the standard formulation of dependent arising). Having discerned the gratification, the other side of the coin needs to be given attention by contemplating the disadvantage, or more literally the “danger”, of that very same experience or behavior that one might cling to.

The Sanskrit and Chinese parallels do not explicitly mention disadvantage and instead draw out the implications of contemplating the disadvantage in detail. The various phrases used can be summarized as pointing to the necessity of seeing whatever one might cling to as impermanent. Drawing out the disadvantage of impermanence in different modes, the spotlight is particularly on disappearance, fading away, and ceasing. This is the cutting edge of impermanence, in a way: the fact that whatever one might cling to will come to an end and disappear. The more this fact is allowed to sink into the mind, the more craving will diminish.

The implications of “disadvantage” and “release” can be explored further by turning to a discourse in the *Majjhima-nikāya* and its *Madhyama-āgama* and *Ekottarika-āgama*

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parallels (Anālayo 2011, p. 121). These relate contemplation of disadvantage and release to the case of feeling. They are thus particularly relevant to early Buddhist teachings on moderation with food, which, in both its lay and monastic modalities, is closely related to feeling, *vedanā*. The relevant passage proceeds as follows:

Monastics, what is the disadvantage in feelings? Monastics, that feelings are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and of a nature to change—that is the disadvantage in feelings. Monastics, what is the release from feelings? Monastics, the dispelling of desire and lust for feeling, the abandoning of desire and lust for them—that is the release from feelings.

(MN 13: *ko ca, bhikkhave, vedanānaṃ ādīnavo? yaṃ, bhikkhave, vedanā aniccā dukkhā vipariṇāmadhammā, ayaṃ vedanānaṃ ādīnavo. kiñ ca, bhikkhave, vedanānaṃ nissaraṇaṃ? yo, bhikkhave, vedanāsu chandarāgavinayo chandarāgappahānaṃ, idaṃ vedanānaṃ nissaraṇaṃ.*)

What is the disadvantage of feelings? Feelings are of an impermanent nature, of an unsatisfactory nature, of a nature to cease—this is reckoned the disadvantage of feelings. What is the release from feelings? If one discards feelings, relinquishes feelings, extinguishes feelings, [lets] feelings end, transcends feelings, and is released from them—this is reckoned the release from feelings.

(MĀ 99: 云何覺患? 覺者是無常法, 苦法, 滅法, 是謂覺患. 云何覺出要? 若斷除覺, 捨離於覺, 滅覺覺盡, 度覺出要, 是謂覺出要).

Again, feelings are impermanent and of a nature to change. Having understood that feelings are impermanent and of a nature to change—this is reckoned the great disadvantage in feelings. What is the release from feelings? If one is able to relinquish feelings, get rid of confused perceptions in relation to feelings—this is reckoned the relinquishing of feelings. (EĀ 21.9: 復次, 痛者無常, 變易之法. 已知痛無常, 變易法者, 是謂痛為大患. 云何痛為出要? 若能於痛捨離, 於痛除諸亂想, 是謂捨離於痛).

Insight into the impermanence of feelings leads to inner freedom from the compulsion of craving. This takes the form of abandoning desire and lust, of transcending feelings, and of getting rid of confused perceptions in relation to them.

These descriptions in the early Buddhist discourses are closely similar to the model of three steps for emerging from compulsive reacting in the case of overeating and other addictive behaviors. The foundation is laid by mindful recognition of one's behavior patterns and habits, which have formed due to the pull of their "gratification". Such mindful recognition then leads over to exploring the related outcomes and results, which in the case of compulsive behavior and craving are clearly a "disadvantage" of the physical disease that results from eating too much. Full appreciation of the price to be paid enables "release" in the sense of a decoupling, so that, with the continuity of mindfulness, one learns to let go of craving rather than act it out.

MBIs and Early Buddhism

Relating current research on the potential of mindfulness to counter overeating to relevant passages from those texts that represent the earliest period of Buddhist thought activity to which we nowadays still have access results in the discovery of an ancient Indian precedent for such interventions in instructions attributed to the Buddha himself. Not only is the Buddha on record for devising a Mindfulness-Based Intervention for overeating that is successful in leading to weight-reduction, the discourse's narrative even involves another person who acts as a sort of mindfulness-trainer and who receives a regular payment for delivering instructions in this Mindfulness-Based Intervention.

This invests the instructions to King Pasenadi with additional significance, as they serve to put into perspective a recurrent criticism of MBIs as involving a substantial departure from Buddhist approaches to, and employment of, mindfulness. An example in case is a statement by Wilson (2014, p. 113) in his ground-breaking monograph study of the current spread of mindfulness-related practices and ideas in the West, to the effect that:

Mindfulness is specifically applied to food in order to gain the benefits derived from eating and drinking in a mindful manner. Instead of everyday activities being used as a skilful means by which to awaken transcendental Buddhist insight into no-self and impermanence, monastic techniques now are being used to transform everyday activities so that they provide greater happiness, health, and self-control to laypeople, many of whom do not consider themselves Buddhists. In mindful eating we find mindfulness meditation being abstracted from its Buddhist context and marketed as a way of providing health, weight loss

The belief that mindfulness practice to overcome problems like overeating involves a substantial departure from Buddhist

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thought is indeed a recurrent theme among critics of MBIs. As reported by Harrington and Dunne (2015, p. 621),

Mindfulness practice, the critics tend to say, was developed to facilitate a path associated with renunciation and a stringent ethical code of right living. Simply teaching “bare attention” without attending to the cultivation of wisdom and discernment risks making mindfulness training hostage to values that are tangential or even anathema to the traditions from which the practice arose. Mindfulness was never supposed to be about weight loss ...

The present study shows that Buddhist mindfulness was from its very inception *also* about weight loss, alongside its main function to facilitate a path of renunciation aimed at awakening. In the hope of not overstating my case, I propose that, instead of involving some form of misappropriation of its Buddhist antecedents, the current mindfulness movement has actually revived an early Buddhist employment of mindfulness to help overeating laity and to bring about weight-reduction.

Conclusion

The potential of MBIs for addressing overeating, attested by a range of studies, has an antecedent in early Buddhist thought and current employment of mindfulness for such purposes can be seen as standing in continuity with that precursor. In early Buddhism, too, mindfulness is seen as a central tool for achieving weight-reduction and the affective dimension of the eating process is given special attention with a clear aim at health benefits. The model of three-steps, developed in contemporary mindfulness-related research, has a counterpart in the early Buddhist teaching on gratification, disadvantage, and release, employed for emerging from patterns of clinging and compulsive behaviors fueled by craving.

Limitations and Future Research

Being a scholar of Buddhist studies, the author’s acquaintance with current clinical research on mindful interventions to address various eating disorders is limited to the selected publications cited in this article. Future research could follow up the basic indications offered in this paper and relate them to more specific applications.

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

EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MBI	mindfulness-based intervention
MBSR	mindfulness-based stress reduction
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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