

The Role of Mindfulness in the Cultivation of Absorption

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Abstract:

This article explores the role performed by mindfulness in the cultivation of states of meditative absorption. Although this dimension of mindfulness is probably of less relevance to its employment in current Mindfulness-Based Interventions, it is perhaps still of interest to explore the operation of mindfulness in such contexts in order to better appreciate the multifunctionality of mindfulness in its original Buddhist setting. Such exploration points in particular to a monitoring role of mindfulness that is of continuous relevance, from overcoming obstacles all the way through the different levels of absorptions, all of which involve deep experiences of mental unification. Throughout, mindfulness has the task of establishing and maintaining the kind of mental presence that enables a precise appraisal of the current condition of the body and the mind.

Key words:

Absorption; concentration; *dhyāna*; *ekaggatā*; embodied mindfulness; *jhāna*; *samādhi*; *sati*; unification of the mind; *vitakka*

Introduction

In the texts reflecting early Buddhism, an expression referring to the earliest period in the history of Buddhism from about the fifth to the third century BCE (Anālayo 2012b), mindfulness cultivated on its own appears to be more a quality of open monitoring rather than involving a strong focus (Anālayo 2019d). This contrasts to some extent to later developments in the Theravāda tradition in particular, which even led to a reconceptualization of mindfulness as involving a plunging into its object (Anālayo 2019a). Yet, even in the case of mindfulness of breathing, the main emphasis in the early Buddhist instructions for such practice seems to have been on breadth of awareness. The type of strong, even exclusive, focus that often comes with meditation on the breath nowadays appears to be the result of a later development (Anālayo 2019b).

At the same time, however, another dimension of mindfulness in early Buddhist texts is directly related to the cultivation of concentration in the form of absorption (Pāli *jhāna*, Sanskrit *dhyāna*, Chinese 禪, Tibetan *bsam gtan*). In evaluating this role of mindfulness, it needs to be noted that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels do not explicitly mention concentration or absorption in their listings of the purposes of mindfulness when undertaken in the form of its four establishments. The relevant passage proceeds as follows (Anālayo 2019c):

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 adhiḅgamāya 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

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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 benefits mentioned in these statements of the normative purposes of cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*, *smṛtyupasthāna*, 念處, *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa*) put into perspective the suggestion by Sujato (2005, p. 186) that “the primary purpose of satipaṭṭhāna is to lead to jhāna.” This suggestion is not an accurate reflection of the position taken in the early discourses. From the viewpoint of the overall soteriological orientation of the early Buddhist teachings, the role of mindfulness in relation to absorption, explored in this article, is of only secondary importance. The overarching purpose of the cultivation of mindfulness in the early discourses in general is rather to contribute directly to progress toward the realization of Nirvāṇa.

The Establishments of Mindfulness as the Sign of Concentration

Building a foundation of mindfulness for the cultivation of concentration finds explicit expression in a succinct statement, extant in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese and Tibetan parallels. This statement involves the term “sign” (*nimitta*, 相, *mtshan ma*) which at times carries a plain causal sense (Anālayo 2003). Such appears to be the case for the present instance, where the term points to what forms a “condition” or “cause” for concentration:

The four establishments of mindfulness are the sign of concentration.

(MN 44: *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā samādhinimittā*).

The four establishments of mindfulness are reckoned to be the sign of concentration indeed.

(MĀ 210: 四念處, 是謂定相也).

The four establishments of mindfulness are the sign of concentration.
(Up 1005: *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa bzhi ni ting nge 'dzin gyi rgyu mtshan no*).

The causal function performed by the four establishments of mindfulness in relation to concentration seems obvious: once mindfulness is established with continuity, the mind naturally tends to settle down. This can be exemplified with another passage, which is related to walking meditation. The Pāli discourse in question and its Chinese parallel list various benefits to be expected from walking meditation. One of these is that the concentration gained in this way will remain for a long time:

Concentration obtained from walking endures for long.
(AN 5.29: *caṅkamādhigato samādhi ciraṭṭhitiko hoti*).

By walking one easily gains concentration of the mind, and having gained concentration of the mind, it will endure.
(EĀ² 20: 為行者易得定意, 已得定意為久).

Here the reference to “concentration” (*samādhi* and 定) reflects a usage of this term in a more general sense of mental collectedness (Anālayo 2006). Concentration in such contexts is not only of the absorptive type.

The practice of walking meditation can be related to the cultivation of the first establishment of mindfulness. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, one of the contemplations of the body listed under the first establishment of mindfulness concerns different bodily postures, including walking (Anālayo 2013b). It seems fair to assume that some such postural mindfulness could also be intended in the passage above. The collectedness of the mind that can be cultivated in this manner through mindfulness practice can serve as the foundation for deeper forms of concentration, including absorption attainment.

The Establishments of Mindfulness Lead to Absorption

How absorption can come about as a result of having cultivated the establishments of mindfulness finds description in the following passage, extant in Pāli and Chinese:

You should train like this: “I shall dwell contemplating the body in regard to the body, diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent with regard to the world.” Monastic, like this you should indeed train yourself. Monastic, when you have cultivated and made much of this concentration, then, monastic, you should cultivate this concentration with application and sustaining, you should cultivate it without application and with a remainder of sustaining, and you should cultivate it without application and without sustaining.
(AN 8.63: *evaṃ sikkhitabbaṃ: kāye kāyānupassī viharissāmi ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassan ti. evaṃ hi te, bhikkhu, sikkhitabbaṃ. yato kho te, bhikkhu, ayaṃ samādhi*)

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evaṃ bhāvito hoti bahulīkato, tato tvaṃ, bhikkhu, imaṃ samādhiṃ savitakkam pi savicāraṃ bhāveyyāsi, avitakkam pi vicāramattaṃ bhāveyyāsi, avitakkam pi avicāraṃ bhāveyyāsi).

Contemplate the body as a body internally, dwelling with utmost diligence, with right mindfulness and right knowing established, taming your own mind well, so as to be apart from covetousness and to be without dejection in the mind ... such concentration should be cultivated well when going and when coming. You should also cultivate it when standing, when sitting, when lying down, when going to sleep, when waking up, and when [both] sleeping and waking up. Again, you should also cultivate concentration with [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, concentration without [directed] awareness but with a remainder of [sustained] contemplation, and cultivate concentration without [directed] awareness and without [sustained] contemplation.

(MĀ 76: 觀內身如身, 行極精勤, 立正念正智, 善自御心, 令離慳貪, 意無憂戚 ... 如此之定, 去時, 來時當善修習, 住時, 坐時, 臥時, 眠時, 寤時, 眠寤時亦當修習. 復次亦當修習有覺有觀定, 無覺少觀定, 修習無覺無觀定; the elided part has the same contemplation externally and internally-and-externally).

Both versions continue by mentioning also concentration with joy (*pīti*/喜), with comfort or happiness (*sāta*/樂), and with equanimity (*upekkhā*/捨). They differ insofar as the Pāli version also mentions concentration without joy (*nippītika*), and its Chinese parallel refers to concentration conjoined with concentration (定共俱定), whatever that may intend.

The significance of the three types of concentration listed in common in the two extracts translated above requires further exploration; suffice it for now to state that these refer to absorption attainment. Here, such attainment takes place based on having cultivated the establishment of mindfulness on the body. Both versions repeat their description for the other three establishments of mindfulness, indicating that the same progression of practice can also be achieved with feeling tones, states of mind, and dharmas.

A noteworthy difference manifests in the Chinese version, which has an additional transition between the contemplation of the body and the cultivation of absorption. This additional passage, perhaps a later addition, brings in a range of activities: going, coming, standing, sitting, lying down, going to sleep, and waking up. From a practical perspective, this points to a similarity with the discourse taken up earlier on walking meditation. The cultivation of mindfulness during any bodily activity, be it formal walking meditation or any of the other activities listed here, builds a foundation for concentration that can eventually issue in absorption. In this way, continuity of mindfulness during various activities can in turn enable gaining deep concentration.

The Buddha's Struggle to Gain Absorption

The Buddha's own gradual progress toward absorption finds description in another Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel (MN 128 and MĀ 72). The two versions agree that it was only after a sustained struggle with a long list of mental obstructions that he was finally able to attain the first absorption (Anālayo 2017b).

The overcoming of the various obstructions listed in this discourse differs from the five hindrances mentioned regularly in other discourses, namely sensual desire, anger, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt. The present passage does not mention the first two, presumably because at this point in his practice the future Buddha had for the time being gone beyond the impact of these two comparatively gross hindrances. In other words, the present description appears to set in at a time when he had already successfully emerged from being at the mercy of these two unwholesome states of mind.

Out of the five hindrances, doubt finds explicit mention in the present context; in fact, in both versions this is the first obstruction taken up. Several of the other obstructions listed seem to reflect the need to find a point of balance, avoiding too little and too much energy, similar in kind to the need to emerge from sloth-and-torpor as well as restlessness-and-worry. In sum, the Buddha's own gradual progress towards absorption, depicted in this discourse, appears to be predominantly concerned with balancing the mind, probably based on his having already left behind gross unwholesome mental obstructions previously.

Be it the five hindrances or the obstructions listed in the present context, their recognition and a monitoring of their removal would be a task for mindfulness. The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel provide detailed instructions in this respect, showing how mindfulness recognizes the presence of a hindrance and then explores the conditions that have led to its arising and those that help emerge from it (Anālayo 2013b). Although such instructions are not found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, this version nevertheless mentions the need to “abandon the five hindrances” in its introductory statement, quoted earlier.

The account of the future Buddha's gradual meditative progress employs the same analysis into three levels of concentration as found in the description of how the establishments of mindfulness lead to absorption, discussed above.

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The relevant passages in the Pāli and Chinese versions offer the following indication:

I cultivated concentration with application and sustaining, I cultivated concentration without application and with a remainder of sustaining, and I cultivated concentration without application and without sustaining.

(MN 128: *savitakkam pi savicāraṃ samādhiṃ bhāvesiṃ, avitakkam pi vicāramattaṃ samādhiṃ bhāvesiṃ, avitakkam pi avicāraṃ samādhiṃ bhāvesiṃ*).

I in turn cultivated these three [levels of] concentration: I cultivated concentration that is with [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation; I cultivated concentration that is without [directed] awareness but with a remainder of [sustained] contemplation; and I cultivated concentration that is without [directed] awareness and without [sustained] contemplation.

(MĀ 72: 我便修學三定, 修學有覺有觀定, 修學無覺少觀定, 修學無覺無觀定).

In the early discourses, this type of description is considerably less common than a standard list of four absorptions, to be examined below. Nevertheless, besides the above instance and the earlier quoted AN 8.63 and its parallel MĀ 76, two other occurrences in parallel versions can be identified, which employ the heading: “three concentrations.” Found in two Pāli discourses and their respective Sanskrit fragment parallels, these are so closely similar that a single English translation can suffice for all four occurrences:

Three concentrations: concentration with application and sustaining, concentration without application and with a remainder of sustaining, concentration without application and without sustaining.

(DN 33: *tayo samādhī: savitakko savicāro samādhi, avitakko vicāramatto samādhi, avitakko avicāro samādhi*).

(Stache-Rosen 1968, p. 88: (*trayaḥ samādhayaḥ: savitarkaḥ s(avicāraḥ samādhir, avitarko vicāramātraḥ samādhi, avitarko 'vicā)raḥ sam(ādhīḥ)*).

(DN 34: *tayo samādhī: savitakko savicāro samādhi, avitakko vicāramatto samādhi, avitakko avicāro samādhi*).

(Mittal 1957, p. 58: *trayaḥ samādhayaḥ: savitarkaḥ savicāraḥ samādhir, avitarko vicāramātraḥ samādhi, a(vitarko) 'vicāraḥ samādhīḥ*).

Another two Pāli discourses that refer to these three concentrations do not have a parallel (SN 43.3 and SN 43.12.3–5). These two occurrences are part of a survey of a series of different paths to the unconditioned, out of which only a reference to the noble eightfold path has a counterpart in Chinese (SĀ 890).

The above survey shows that it is not the case, as proposed by Bucknell (2019, p. 404), that “only one” instance of such an occurrence among Pāli discourses has a parallel in another transmission lineage. Instead, four such instances find confirmation in parallels (DN 33: Stache-Rosen 1968; DN 34: Mittal 1957; MN 128: MĀ 74; and AN 8.63: MĀ 76). The taking of this position by Bucknell (2019) is unexpected, as the main purpose of his article is to compare the interpretations of the first absorption proposed by Stuart-Fox (1989) and Anālayo (2014b) respectively, of which the latter had already shown that several Pāli discourses featuring this type of presentation are supported by their parallels (note 42). In sum, these three levels of concentration are sufficiently well attested in discourses from distinct transmission lineages to warrant being taken seriously as representative of early Buddhist thought.

This threefold presentation need not be considered as involving a significant departure from the more common way of presenting absorption attainment in a fourfold manner. It just shows that the gradual deepening of concentration can be described in complementary ways. Whereas the standard presentation only draws attention to the presence or absence of application and sustaining, the threefold analysis also takes into account an intermediate stage, when one of the two absorption factors in question has already been left behind, but the other is still required.

The precise implications of this intermediate stage depend on how one understands the first of these two factors. On adopting the meaning “application,” the main idea would be that, at first, application or directing the mind is required together with its sustaining. As concentration deepens, the effort to apply and direct the mind is no longer needed. The mind naturally tends

toward its object, but for it to remain there some sustaining is still called for. Eventually, however, even that is no longer required, and the mind naturally rests in its absorbed condition.

This progression could be illustrated with the example of a bird, an example adopted, with some modifications, from Theravāda exegesis (Vism 142). At first the bird needs to move the wings and keep them stretched out in order to fly up, just as the meditator at first needs both application and sustaining. Once up in the air, however, the bird might just fly along with outstretched wings, without needing to move them any longer, just as the meditator eventually only needs to sustain the mind in its concentrated condition. Eventually, the bird might reach the place it wanted to go to and come to roost on the branch of a tree without needing to keep its wings outstretched, just as the practitioner might eventually enter such a level of absorption where even the act of sustaining is no longer required.

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The Significance of *vitakka*

The Pāli term here rendered as “application” is *vitakka*, which in its general usage in the discourses often connotes “thought.” Bucknell (2019, p. 397) reasoned that, according to the standard Pāli dictionary by Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993), “*vitakka* denotes ‘thinking, thought,’ while the suffixing of *vicāra* (in the compound term *vitakka-vicāra*) serves to reinforce this meaning.”

The entry in Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993 p. 620) also includes “initial application,” although apparently taken to reflect a meaning the term *vitakka* acquired in exegetical texts. According to Monier Williams (1899/1999, p. 962), “purpose, intention” is one of the possible meanings for the corresponding Sanskrit *vitarka*. Hence, it needs to be ascertained if this presumably later meaning might already be relevant to some instances of the use of *vitakka* in the early discourses.

For examining the range of meaning of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, a recurrent description in Pāli discourses can be taken up, which employs verb forms of the two terms in question. On adopting the most widespread meaning of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the passage could be translated as conveying that “having previously thought and pondered, afterward one breaks out into speech” (MN 44: *pubbe ... vitakketvā vicāretvā pacchā vācaṃ bhindati*).

Ideally this should indeed be the case. However, at times one might be speaking freely and formulate words in the mind just at the time of speaking, rather than having thought it all out beforehand; note that the use of “previously,” *pubbe*, and “afterward,” *pacchā*, in the passage in question clearly implies that the speech happens only after thinking has earlier been undertaken. Another relevant situation would be when being provoked, causing one to break out into a type of speech that one might have avoided, had one taken time to think and ponder first. On such occasions *vitakka* and *vicāra* would still be required to be able to speak, yet, they could hardly stand for careful and deliberate reflection.

Another problem becomes evident when turning to the three types of concentration. Adopting the rendering “thinking and pondering” would not work particularly well for the intermediate stage, described as having no more *vitakka* but still *vicāra*. Given that “pondering” stands for sustained thinking activity, from a practical viewpoint it is not clear how this could still take place when thought has gone into abeyance. In contrast, on adopting the senses of “application” and “sustaining”, the interim stage can more easily be made sense of in relation to absorption attainment.

Another point worth considering is the implication, from the viewpoint of the description of the Buddha’s progress to awakening, of characterizing the first absorption as follows (Bucknell 1989, p. 142):

initial attempts to stop the flow of thought and keep attention focused on the breathing or other objects are largely unsuccessful; however, these attempts do have the effect of eliminating emotional involvement in the contents of consciousness, by replacing it with concentrative energy.

In this way, the first absorption should according to Bucknell (2019, p. 395) be understood to be “a state that even non-meditators might occasionally experience for brief periods if the associated conditions happened to be favourable.” It is not easy to see why the Buddha, who must have been a highly gifted meditator, needed to overcome a long list of mental obstacles one after the other, an overcoming that moreover appears to have set in after having already put to rest gross mental obstructions, just in order to reach such a condition of the mind. A state of mind resulting from a lack of success in stopping thought should not require so much struggle. The present setting makes it considerably more plausible that the result of the future Buddha’s sustained struggle was a level of concentration outside of the range of what is accessible to non-meditators.

Other discourses in fact support the impression that the first absorption is already a deeply concentrated mental state (Anālayo 2017a). These considerations make it rather improbable that the present context can be understood along the lines of the suggestion by Bucknell (1993, p. 397) that

vitakka-vicāra simply denotes the normal flow of thought, the stream of imagery and verbalizing which, like a television program that is rarely switched off, provides a persistent though vague and unobtrusive background to our everyday waking consciousness.

Perhaps the historical layering proposed in a Pāli dictionary published a century ago need not be taken as the final word on the matter. Of relevance here would also be a study by Cousins (1992), dedicated precisely to the meaning of *vitakka* and *vicāra* in the context of deeper experiences of concentration. Agreeing with the employment of the rendering “thought,” he nevertheless cautions to keep in mind that the context of absorption concerns nuances of meaning not self-evident in the usual English usage of the term “thought.” According to his assessment, the sense conveyed by *vitakka* can be understood “as essentially the activity of bringing different objects into firm focus before the mind’s eye — be those objects thoughts or

mental pictures” (p. 139). This broadens the range of meaning accorded to *vitakka* and prevents taking the term as invariably referring to normal thinking activity.

As noted by Bucknell (2019, p. 398), ““(mental) one-pointedness’ implies absence of thinking.” Keeping in mind the broader implications of the term *vitakka* that have emerged from the above survey, the question to be explored next is

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therefore what the early discourses indicate regarding the nature of the first absorption, in particular if its attainment is characterized by the presence or the absence of thinking.

The First Absorption

An occurrence of the standard description of the four absorptions is part of a report of the Buddha’s cultivation of concentration previous to the actual event of his awakening, which thematically ties in with the passage studied above on his struggle to gain mastery of absorption in the first place. The description of the Buddha’s attainment of the first absorption just before his awakening, extant in Pāli and in Chinese, proceeds as follows:

Secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states, with application and sustaining, with joy and happiness born of seclusion, I dwelled having attained the first absorption.

(MN 4: *vivicc’ eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsiṃ*).

With intention that is not scattered, with a constantly unified mind, free from perceptions of sensual desire, with [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, with mindfulness, and supported by joy and happiness, I dwelled in the first absorption.

(EĀ 31.1: 意不錯亂, 恒若一心, 無貪欲想, 有覺, 有觀, 念, 持喜樂, 遊於初禪).

From the viewpoint of the main topic of this article, a significant difference here is that only the Chinese version explicitly mentions the presence of mindfulness during the attainment of the first absorption. For evaluating the significance of this disparity, it is helpful to turn first to another difference between the two versions that relates to the above-discussed question of the significance of *vitakka* as an absorption factor. This is the reference in the Chinese version to “unification of the mind” (一心). Although such unification is not mentioned in the actual description of the first absorption in the Pāli parallel, the text that precedes this description in the same discourse does refer to it:

Unshaking energy was aroused in me, mindfulness was established without loss, the body was calm and untroubled, and the mind concentrated and unified.

(MN 4: *āraddhaṃ kho pana me ... viriyaṃ ahosi asallīnaṃ, upaṭṭhitā sati asammuṭṭhā, passaddho kāyo asāraddho, samāhitaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ*).

It is right after this passage that the standard description of the first absorption occurs. Given that already before entry into the first absorption the future Buddha had cultivated a concentrated and “unified” mind, with the deepening of concentration on actual entry into the first absorption such unification must have continued to be present, if not increased. It could hardly be otherwise.

Unification of the Mind

An explicit mention of the presence of unification of the mind in the first absorption can be seen in the following passage, extant in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan:

In a monastic who has attained the first absorption there occur application, sustaining, joy, happiness, and unification of the mind.
(MN 43: *paṭhamam jhānam samāpannassa bhikkhuno vitakko ca vattati vicāro ca pīti ca sukhañ ca cittekaggatā ca*).

The first absorption has five factors: [directed] awareness, [sustained] contemplation, joy, happiness, and unification of the mind.
(MĀ 210: 初禪有五支: 覺, 觀, 喜, 樂, 一心).

[The first absorption] possesses five factors: [directed] comprehension, [sustained] discernment, joy, happiness, and unification of the mind.
(Up 1005: *yan lag lnga dang ldan te, rtog pa dang, dpyod pa dang, dga' ba dang, bde ba dang, sems rtse gcig pa'o*).

The Pāli version differs insofar as, before giving the above definition, it also presents the standard description of the first absorption and lists the five hindrances. Not being found in the two parallels, this additional part is of less relevance for ascertaining the early Buddhist position on the nature of the first absorption.

The main parts of the Chinese and Tibetan versions parallel MN 44 rather than MN 43. Here and elsewhere, the close similarity in the mode of exposition adopted in these two discourses appears to have led to some degree of exchange of passages between them (Anālayo 2020). As a result, in the present case the list of the five absorption factors is found in MN 43 and in the Chinese and Tibetan parallels to MN 44.

Bucknell (2019, p. 406) considered this list of the five absorption factors to be late, as it is “in the *Abhidhamma* style. Stating the number of factors present and then naming them as a bare list is a typical characteristic of *Abhidhamma* texts.” Yet, already what tradition reckons to have been the first

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teaching given by the Buddha contains a bare list of the eight factors of the path, explicitly introduced as “eightfold” and thus by stating the number of its factors (SN 56.11; Anālayo 2012a and 2013a). Such lists are a pervasive feature of the early discourses and are probably better

reckoned as characteristic of oral transmission rather than necessarily being reflections of the influence of Abhidharma thought.

In fact, a belief held by some scholars in the past, according to which lists or question-and-answer exchanges should be seen as in themselves reflective of the influence of Abhidharma, is in need of revision (Anālayo 2014a). Instead, Abhidharma influence can more convincingly be detected in an attempt to provide a comprehensive coverage of a particular topic. A case in point is a Pāli discourse without a parallel that gives such a comprehensive survey of the factors found in the first absorption:

Application, sustaining, joy, happiness, unification of the mind, contact, feeling tone, perception, volition, mind, desire, determination, energy, mindfulness, equipoise, and attention.

(MN 111: *vitakko ca vicāro ca pīti ca sukhañ ca cittekaggatā ca phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittaṃ chando adhimokkho viriyaṃ sati upekkhā manasikāro*).

Although this passage includes mindfulness and unification of the mind, its testimony for reconstructing early Buddhist thought is weakened by the fact that it clearly reflects nascent Abhidharma thought (Anālayo 2014a). The same does not hold for the list of five factors of absorption, however, which, similar to the three types of concentrations, discussed above, also needs to be taken seriously as a testimony to early Buddhist thought.

Another relevant Pāli discourse reports the Buddha instructing Mahāmoggallāna, a gifted meditator, to help him stabilize each of the four absorptions. Unfortunately, a Chinese *Āgama* parallel has only preserved this type of intervention in the case of the second absorption (SĀ 501). As a result, the relevant part is only extant in Pāli. This diminishes its strength as a testimony for early Buddhist thought. The relevant instruction, given by the Buddha, proceeds as follows:

Steady the mind in the first absorption, make the mind unified in the first absorption, concentrate the mind in the first absorption!

(SN 40.1: *paṭhame jhāne cittaṃ sañṭhapehi, paṭhame jhāne cittaṃ ekodikarohi, paṭhame jhāne cittaṃ samādahā ti*).

The second of the three injunctions implies that unification of the mind is characteristic of the first absorption, otherwise it would fail to make sense for the Buddha to instruct his disciple Mahāmoggallāna to unify the mind in the first absorption.

Another instruction by the Buddha, addressed to his attendant Ānanda and extant in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan, also speaks of unifying the mind in relation to the experience of the first absorption:

Ānanda, how does a monastic steady the mind internally, quieten it, make it unified, and concentrate it? Ānanda, here a monastic, secluded from sensual desires and secluded from unwholesome states etc. [dwells having attained the first absorption].

(MN 122: *kathañ c' ānanda bhikkhu ajjhātam eva cittaṃ saṅghapeti sannisādeti ekodikaroti samādahati? idh' ānanda bhikkhu vivicc' eva kāmehi kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi pe*).

Ānanda, how does a monastic keep the mind internally established in tranquility so that it becomes unified and concentrated? A monastic soaks, thoroughly moistens, and completely pervades this body with joy and happiness born of seclusion [experienced in the first absorption].

(MĀ 191: 阿難, 云何比丘持內心住止令一定耶? 比丘者此身離生喜樂漬, 盡潤漬, 普遍充滿).

Ānanda, how does a monastic just settle the mind within, rightly settle it, collectedly settle it, thoroughly settle it, discipline it, quieten it, thoroughly quieten it, make it unified, and make it concentrated? Here a monastic drenches this body with joy and happiness born of seclusion, thoroughly drenching it, thoroughly saturating it, thoroughly permeating it.

(Skilling 1994, p. 206: *kun dga' bo ji ltar na dge slong sems nang kho nar 'jog par byed, yang dag par 'jog par byed, bsdus te 'jog par byed, nye bar 'jog par byed, dul bar byed, zhi bar byed, nye bar zhi bar byed, rgyud gcig tu byed cing, ting nge 'dzin du byed ce na? 'di la dge slong dben pa las skyes pa 'i dga' ba dang bde bas lus de nyid mngon par rlan par byed, yongs su rlan par byed, yongs su tshim par byed cing, yongs su khyab par byed de*).

The parallel versions differ in the way they refer to the first absorption. The Pāli discourse has an abbreviated reference to the standard description of its attainment, whereas the Chinese and Tibetan parallels describe the bodily experience of the first absorption. Alongside such differences, however, they do agree in indicating that with the first absorption the mind becomes “unified.”

Such passages lend support to the indication, found in the account of the Buddha’s pre-awakening cultivation of the first

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absorption, that its attainment indeed involves unification (or “one-pointedness”) of the mind. It follows that the standard description of the first absorption was not intended to be exhaustive, as it does not mention the factor of unification of the mind, even though other discourse passages show that this was considered an aspect of its experience. The peculiar nature of such absorption descriptions that emerges in this way had already been recognized by Cousins (1973, p. 124), who warned that one “should not however make the mistake of supposing that the list of *jhāna* factors represents the totality of the qualities experienced therein.” In sum, as noted by Anālayo (2014b, p. 78n24):

It would be a misunderstanding of the purpose of these descriptions to assume that the first absorption is without unification of the mind because this is not explicitly mentioned, just as it would be mistaken to conclude that the first and the second absorption are without mindfulness just because mindfulness is only mentioned in the standard description of the third and fourth absorptions.

The Second Absorption

In the case of the second absorption, described in the account of the Buddha’s meditative progress to awakening, the Chinese version again mentions mindfulness:

With the stilling of application and sustaining, with inner confidence and unification of the mind, being without application and without sustaining, with joy and happiness born of concentration, I dwelled having attained the second absorption.

(MN 4: *vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā ajjhataṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsiṃ*).

Abandoning [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation, with internal joy and happiness concurrent with a unified mind that is without [directed] awareness and without [sustained] contemplation, concentrated, mindful, and happy, I dwelled in the second absorption.

(EĀ 31.1: 除有覺有觀, 內有歡喜, 兼有一心, 無覺, 無觀, 定, 念, 喜, 遊於二禪).

The two versions agree in referring twice to the absence of the factors that are characteristic of the first absorption. This is noteworthy, since once the description begins by referring to the “stilling of application and sustaining” (MN 4) or to “abandoning [directed] awareness and [sustained] contemplation” (EĀ 31.1), it is not immediately evident why the same condition is mentioned again. That this is nevertheless done supports the impression that the purpose of such descriptions is not to provide some sort of neat inventory of mental factors. Instead, its concerns are to highlight what is considered to be of particular relevance from a practical perspective. From such a viewpoint, it can indeed make sense to state twice the outstanding quality of the second absorption, namely that the subtle degree of effort involved in applying and sustaining the mind has completely gone into abeyance.

This same characteristic also explains why unification of the mind now finds explicit mention. The reason is not because there has been no unification earlier. Instead, the reason is that with the complete mental stillness reached through letting go of application and sustaining, the degree of unification of the mind reached at this juncture becomes sufficiently prominent so as to deserve explicit highlighting.

Needless to say, unification of the mind can be of differing degrees. A Pāli discourse without parallel relates a mental state of being unified (*ekagga*) to meditation practice in any of the four postures, including walking (AN 4.12). Some degree of unification of the mind can even come into being after having listened to a teaching. This finds exemplification in another Pāli discourse without parallels, which describes qualities required to ensure that a teaching unfolds its liberating potential (AN 5.151). One of these is to listen attentively and the next is to pay penetrative attention with a unified mind (*ekaggacitta*). The point appears to be that, after having listened attentively, the mind needs to become quiet to allow for the full unfolding of the liberating function of penetrative attention (*yoniso manasikāra*; Anālayo 2009). Although the deployment of such penetrative attention takes off from hearing teachings, it goes beyond mere

reflecting about them and can take place in a mind in which active thinking has gone into abeyance.

Unification of the mind cultivated in various postures or after having listened to a teaching will of course be weaker than the unification experienced with entry into the first absorption, and this in turn is weaker than the unification experienced with entry into the second absorption. From the perspective of a gradual deepening of unification, it becomes perhaps less surprising that unification of the mind is only mentioned at the present juncture, when it has reached a stage of sufficient depth to merit being highlighted.

The Third Absorption

Returning to the account of the Buddha's pre-awakening cultivation of absorption; both versions mention mindfulness in the case of the third absorption:

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And with the fading away of joy I dwelled equipoised, mindful, and clearly knowing, and experiencing happiness through the body, being one whom noble ones designate as 'one who dwells happily with equipoise and mindfulness,' I dwelled having attained the third absorption.

(MN 4: *pītiyā ca virāgā upekkhako ca vihāsiṃ sato ca sampajāno, sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedesiṃ; yaṃ taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti: upekkhako satimā sukhavihārī ti tatiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsiṃ*).

Seeing and knowing within myself the absence of any wanting, aware of bodily happiness, as sought after by noble ones, equanimous, mindful, and happy, I dwelled in the third absorption. (EĀ 31.1: 我自觀知內無念欲, 覺身快樂, 諸賢聖所希望, 護, 念, 歡樂, 遊於三禪).

Theravāda exegesis clarifies that mindfulness and clearly knowing were of course already present during the previous two levels of absorption (Vism 162). Their explicit mention in the third absorption is apparently motivated by their particular importance at this juncture. Close monitoring is required in order to prevent the mind from relapsing into the more intense joy, characteristic of the second absorption, and to ensure that it instead remains content with the quieter happiness of the present experience.

In the case of the transition from the first to the second absorption, it seems indeed comparatively easier to discern whether one applies and sustains the mind or not. In fact, the threefold listing discussed earlier even introduces an interim stage when application has already gone into abeyance, but sustaining is still required. The distinction between joy and happiness relevant to the present transition from the second to the third absorption, however, requires a refined degree of attention, making it understandable why the task performed by mindfulness in the present context was considered of sufficient importance to merit explicit mention.

The explanation given in Theravāda exegesis conforms with the position taken by several modern writers. Shankman (2008, p. 48) noted that "mindfulness, keeping in mind the

meditation subject, is present in all four *jhānas*, but this is the first time it is mentioned in the standard definition, emphasizing that it comes to prominence in the third *jhāna*.” Harvey (2018, p. 10) pointed out that “being ‘mindful and clearly comprehending’ is particularly mentioned ... evidently they here come to the fore.” Commenting on the third absorption, Griffiths (1983, p. 61) reasoned that mindfulness and clearly knowing

refer to a kind of non-judgemental awareness of every event in the meditator’s physical and psychological environment as it occurs ... [which] does not involve intellectual analysis or classification of phenomena, but rather a simple noting of things as they occur.

Although explicitly mentioned only at this juncture, the role performed by mindfulness does not appear to differ substantially from its earlier function. Throughout, its task is to monitor what is taking place through establishing mental presence. This much is already required when overcoming the hindrances previous to absorption attainment. At the present juncture of meditative experience, this monitoring function becomes particularly evident and important in order to maintain the mind in the third absorption.

The Fourth Absorption

The role of mindfulness continues to be relevant for the attainment of the fourth absorption:

With the abandoning of happiness and the abandoning of pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and sadness, without pain and without happiness, and with purity of mindfulness and equipoise, I dwelled having attained the fourth absorption.

(MN 4: *sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbe va somanassadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamā adukkham asukhaṃ upekkhāsati pārisuddhiṃ catutthaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsiṃ*).

Having abandoned happiness and pain, being also without any joy or sadness, without pain and without happiness, with equanimity and mindfulness purified, I dwelled in the fourth absorption.

(EĀ 31.1: 苦樂已除, 無復憂喜, 無苦, 無樂, 護念清淨, 遊於四禪).

Similar to the case of the second absorption, an outstanding quality finds mention twice: after mentioning that happiness and pain have been abandoned, both versions repeat this condition by indicating that the resultant experience is without pain and without happiness.

In addition to this duplication, both versions mention several factors that had already been abandoned well before attaining the fourth absorption. Pain and sadness have already been overcome much earlier, and even joy has been left behind when proceeding from the second to the third absorption, so that only happiness was still present in the third absorption and now has also been left behind. In the words of Gunaratana (1985/1996, p. 97), “three of the four conditions for the fourth *jhāna* are fulfilled with the attainment of the first three *jhānas*, and only the fourth ... with the actual entrance upon the fourth *jhāna*,” a progressive elimination studied in detail by Kuan (2005).

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The fact that both versions nevertheless mention all of these factors reflects again the function of descriptions of absorption attainment in the early discourses. These are evidently not concerned with giving a precise inventory of the respective state, otherwise there would be no reason for them to mention now what has happened much earlier and also refer to a particular feature twice. Apparently in order to highlight characteristics of the experience, they throw into relief the culmination point in deep equanimity reached at the present juncture by giving an overview of the entire trajectory that has led up to it and by repeatedly emphasizing that both happiness and pain are left behind for good.

This culmination in deep equanimity also results in a peak of the cultivation of mindfulness, as both qualities reach complete purity at this point. From the viewpoint of the monitoring function of mindfulness throughout progress through the absorptions, it is at the present juncture that its fostering of mental balance manifests to a superb degree, which must be due to the equipoised nature of the state of mind in which it occurs and which its presence supports.

Mindfulness of the Body in the First Absorption

The conclusion that mindfulness is present in all absorptions receives further support from yet another discourse, extant in Pāli and Chinese, which describes a series of exercises for the cultivation of mindfulness of the body. One of these concerns the bodily dimension of the four absorptions, a topic already mentioned earlier in this article in relation to the presence of unification of the mind in the first absorption. The relevant passage for the first absorption, found in a survey of exercises for mindfulness of the body, proceeds as follows:

One drenches, pervades, saturates, and suffuses this very body with joy and happiness born of seclusion, such that there is no part of the whole body that is not touched by the joy and happiness born of seclusion.

(MN 119: *so imam eva kāyaṃ vivekajena pītisukhena abhisandeti parisandeti paripūreti parippharati, nāssa kiñci sabbāvato kāyassa vivekajena pītisukhena apphuṭaṃ hoti*).

One soaks the body, moistens, and completely pervades it with joy and happiness born of seclusion, [so that] within this body no part is not pervaded by joy and happiness born of seclusion.

(MĀ 81: 離生喜樂漬身, 潤澤, 普遍充滿, 於此身中, 離生喜樂, 無處不遍).

The Pāli version differs by preceding the above passage with the standard description of the first absorption. This difference can safely be considered a later addition. As already noted in Anālayo (2011, p. 674), in the present case “it is not the attainment of *jhāna* as such, but rather the bodily experience caused by *jhāna* that comes under the heading of mindfulness of the body.” Hence, the standard description of absorption attainment is to some degree superfluous.

The two parallel versions agree in indicating that the degree of unification reached with the first absorption also extends to the body, which is an integral part of the overall experience of joy and happiness born of seclusion to such an extent that the whole body is thoroughly pervaded by it.

Notably, both versions present this bodily experience of the first (and other) absorptions under the heading of “mindfulness of the body.” From the viewpoint of mindfulness, this adds yet another perspective to its monitoring role, showing that this extends also to the somatic dimension of absorption experience, in addition to comprising its mental dimension. In this way, the role of mindfulness appears to be crucial for the cultivation of absorption, providing an all-important monitoring function that comprehensively reflects the actual condition of body and mind during such experiences.

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

AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); EĀ², partial *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 150A); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*; Vism, *Visuddhimagga*.

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