



## Sarah Shaw: *Mindfulness: Where it Comes from and What it Means*. Shambala, Boulder, 2020, 202 pp

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As the inaugural volume of the new Shambala Publication series titled “Buddhist Foundations,” the book under review promises to offer a much-needed addition to the general field of mindfulness studies: a survey of different Buddhist constructs of this quality, set against the background of the historical development of various Buddhist traditions.

The book begins by taking up different aspects of mindfulness—including interesting observations on the origins of the English rendering used to translated *sati/smṛti*—considered alongside its various functions and occurrences in early Buddhist texts. Next come the perspectives of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma traditions, followed by chapters on Mahāyāna, China and East Asia, and Tibet. The book comes to a close with two chapters on mindfulness of breathing and on modern interpretations of mindfulness.

The implementation of this in itself fascinating project suffers from several mistakes made by the author. Within the context of the present review, a comprehensive survey of such errors will not be possible, wherefore some selected instances will have to suffice to show the type of problems involved. One example shows up right away with the first sentence that opens the preface (p. xi), according to which “the Buddha changed the use of the Sanskrit word for memory (*smṛti*). The new meaning appeared quite different; as *sati*, in Pāli, it came to be associated with an attentive awareness to present events.” The belief in a substantial innovation, mentioned from time to time also in the remainder of the book, ignores the research by Klaus (1993). This research has shown that already in the *Rgveda*, and thus many centuries before the time of the Buddha, derivatives of the same root *smṛ* could refer to directing awareness to present events. It follows that the idea of attending to the present moment has been part of the

semantic field of *smṛti* right from the outset of its attested use in Indian religious traditions.

Another problem concerns the ethical quality of mindfulness. The early discourses recurrently refer to wrong types of mindfulness, which according to the author can be understood to refer, for example, to “the alertness present when there is desire to harm or steal” (p. 47). However, some pages later the author reasoned: “Do any of the unskillful consciousnesses contain mindfulness? No, they do not. What early texts suggest, Abhidharma states outright” (p. 76). This statement is incompatible with the position taken earlier; the desire to harm or steal is quite definitely an unskillful state of mind. The position taken in later Theravāda works, according to which mindfulness is invariably wholesome, needs to be acknowledged as a departure from the early Buddhist construct of mindfulness. These distinct usages should not be conflated with each other by stating that, “as we said before, mindfulness *only* occurs, in early Buddhism, in skillful consciousness” (p. 84).

Another issue arises in relation to the author’s identification of two central aspects of mindfulness (p. 43): “Both of these are found described, with much the same language, in most forms of Buddhism. The first is ‘not drifting away’ (*apilāpana*).” This particular Pāli term has undergone a radical reinterpretation (or suffered from a substantial misunderstanding) in the Theravāda tradition (Norman 1988), which led to a significant change in the understanding of mindfulness (Anālayo 2019). This development, specific to the Theravāda tradition, does not represent something found, in much the same language, in most forms of Buddhism.

Turning from the quality of mindfulness to its practice, the chapter on the four establishments of mindfulness begins as follows (p. 58): “One great text has formed the basis of much Buddhist practice throughout history: the *Great Sutta on Mindfulness*, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (D 2.290-315). It traveled wherever Buddhism went.” The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* mentioned here differs from the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, found in another Pāli discourse collection, by presenting a

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detailed analysis of the four noble truths. The resultant textual expansion had already been recognized by Winternitz (1920) as a commentarial interpolation, an assessment repeated since then in various ways by other scholars. It is this commentarial interpolation that differentiates the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* from the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and thereby underpins the choice of the former over the latter in the above quote. Yet, there is no evidence at all that a similar interpolation took place in non-Theravāda texts; in fact, the two Chinese *Āgama* parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* do not even mention the four noble truths. This makes it difficult to understand how the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* could have had any discernible influence on other Buddhist traditions, let alone travel wherever Buddhism went.

The author also does not appear to have been well familiar with the content shared by the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, evident in several minor mistakes. These involve attributing “clear comprehension” to mindfulness of the bodily postures (p. 59), even though this quality only occurs in relation to another exercise concerning bodily activities; reversing the order of the contemplations of the anatomical parts and the elements (p. 60); and presenting the “eightfold path” as an exercise distinct from the previously mentioned four noble truths (p. 60), despite the fact that the former is just an aspect of the latter.

Another remark concerns the Chinese parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (p. 128): “One early translation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, for instance, includes the differentiation between sweet and sour among elements of taste under practices having to do with the body — the basics of Chinese culinary experience are integrated straight away into this first foundation of mindfulness!” It is not clear what text the author has in mind, as the two Chinese *Āgama* parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (the only texts the above phrasing could reasonably be taken to intend) do not have such a reference. The idea that Chinese culinary experience must be responsible for some such reference is also not clear, as the Pāli discourses mention food having sour (*ambila*) or sweet (*madhura*) taste, so that such qualifications could already have been found in an Indic original used for translation into Chinese. Throughout, the author fails to do justice to the crucial potential of the two Chinese *Āgama* parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* to put into perspective the presentation in the Pāli version, each of these three texts being an equally relevant testimony to early Buddhist oral transmission, in particular when writing a book meant to provide a historical perspective.

Regarding other forms of mindfulness practice, there is a notable tendency to present any kind of ritual or devotional Buddhist observance as involving mindfulness. An example is the “monthly ritual known as the *pāṭimokkha*. This is the monthly observance of monastics whereby they repeat their commitment to the Vinaya rules” (p. 22). According to the author, this involves the “mindfulness of those participating in

the ritual circle. Everyone appears wakeful, attentive”; in sum, “this simple ceremony ... is an exercise in a group mindfulness” (p. 23). The description of everyone appearing wakeful and attentive is far from the usual reality of such ritual performances. That the description is the product of imagination rather than a reflection of field experience can also be seen in the qualification of this observance as “monthly.” This practice does not take place just once a month, but much rather every fortnight, on new moon and on full moon days.

Also problematic is the historical background provided when surveying various articulations of mindfulness. For example, in relation to the early Buddhist teaching on impermanence, the author commented that, “shortly after his death [i.e. the Buddha’s], this understanding was extended into the doctrine of momentariness” (p. 72), which “then became systematized in the higher, or special, teaching (i.e. the Abhidhamma)” (p. 73). According to the detailed research of the beginnings of the doctrine of momentariness by von Rospatt (1995), this radicalized understanding of impermanence postdates the closure of the canonical Abhidharma collections. It certainly should be dated long after the Buddha’s death.

The same need to discern what are later developments applies to the following statement: “Matter had been considered ‘real’ in early Buddhism” (p. 109). Granting to matter the status of being ultimately real is only a later development. Early Buddhist thought takes a midway position between absolute realism and absolute idealism, emphasizing the conditionality of the perception of matter.

Again, a reference to the “ancient bodhisattva vow” (p. 109), together with the assumption that the main innovation of later times is the tendency to make the bodhisattva path incumbent on all practitioners, is unconvincing. The bodhisattva ideal is a distinctly late development; in fact, early Buddhist thought does not even conceive of the Buddha as having prepared himself over many lifetimes for his eventual awakening (Wangchuk 2007).

Yet another example is the author’s assessment that the “notion of the luminosity of the mind” is “an assumed background to so much early Buddhist theory” (p. 112). The relevant Pāli discourse quoted by the author (p. 93) conveys the impression that there is a sort of innate luminosity of the mind that persists even when defilements are temporarily present. Such an idea, probably the result of a textual corruption of a passage that originally was not concerned with luminosity, stands in contrast to so much of early Buddhist theory (Anālayo 2017).

Problems also crop up regarding dates. An example is the suggestion that oral transmission changed “by the fifth century CE, when written culture began to interact fully with the oral” (p. 19). According to the *Mahāvamsa* (33.100), the Pāli canonical texts were written down already in the first century BCE. What happened in the fifth century CE is rather a

translation of the Sinhala commentaries into Pāli under the aegis of Buddhaghosa. But this did not mark the onset of a fuller interaction between written and oral modes of transmission, which had already happened several centuries earlier.

Although more mistakes and misunderstandings could be listed, this much already suffices to enable drawing the conclusion that a promising project has been poorly executed. In fact, several errors found in the book could have been rectified if the author had at least consulted the relevant publications listed in the short bibliography at the end of the book. In sum, it can only be hoped that someone better acquainted with relevant research in Buddhist studies will take up the basic idea again and produce a reliable history of mindfulness in the Buddhist traditions, thereby actualizing the remarkable potential that in principle can be expected of such a study.

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