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Mindfulness De- or Recontextualized? Traditional Buddhist and Contemporary Perspectives

抽離或重構語境的正念？傳統佛教與當代之詮釋

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關鍵詞：佛教、正念、大手印、禪修、語境重構、跨文化對話、存在療法

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Abstract

In the past few decades, mindfulness meditation and other techniques of Buddhist origin have been rapidly gaining in recognition as means of facilitating psychophysical health and well-being. However, this growing enthusiasm has recently been checked by a host of criticism that questions the ways mindfulness has been (mis)construed and (mis)appropriated in Western culture. Critics have been especially vocal about the dangers of "mystifying mindfulness": extracting it from its traditional framework and transforming it into a watered-down, decontextualized self-help method. Although sympathetic to its main thrust, we believe such criticism must be appropriately qualified. To begin with, what critics often neglect is the fact that Buddhism is not a homogenous tradition, but exhibits great diversity. For the most part, critics base their claims on *Abhidamma* Buddhism and tend to ignore the contribution of other (particularly Northern and East Asian) Buddhist traditions. Drawing on recent work on *Mahāmudrā* in Tibetan Buddhism and early Chan in Chinese Buddhism, the paper argues that contemporary conceptions of mindfulness have telling historical precedents, which have important implications for current debates. Specifically, we suggest that the inclusion of Northern and East Asian Buddhist traditions provides us with a more nuanced conception of the process of contextualization and allows us to distinguish between the *narrow* context of *formal* practice (*during* meditation sessions) and the *broad* context of *informal* practice (*between* meditation sessions). It is then argued that contemporary approaches need to be more heedful of the latter and give up on the naïve essentialist notion of absolute decontextualization. Finally, we make a tentative case for an existentialist (re)contextualization of mindfulness based on a broader conception of suffering and existential transformation.

摘要

過去幾十年裏，源出佛教的正念禪修等方法迅速的受到肯定，認為有助於促進身心健康並提昇幸福感。然而，這股熱潮近來卻廣受批評，質疑這類的正念法，是在西方文化中被理解／曲解與移用／濫用。論者特別指出「玄秘正念」（mystifying mindfulness）的危害：將正念從傳統的框架中抽離，轉化為一種稀釋並去脈絡化的自助方法。儘管持有同感，但我們認為，應該給予這些評論適度的限制。首先，論者常忽略佛教並非同質性之傳統，它展現了顯著的多樣性。一般來說，論者的主張根據的是阿毗達摩（印度部派佛教），並傾向於忽略其它佛教傳統（尤其是北亞與東亞）的貢獻。本文憑藉於近來研究藏傳佛教大手印與中國佛教早期禪法的著作，論證當代正念觀夙有淵源，這對目前的論爭意義非凡。特別是，涵括了北亞與東亞的佛教傳統，我們得以對正念脈絡化的過程獲致更為精細的概念，並且彰顯出冥想期中正規練習的狹義語境，以及在冥想期之間非正規練習的廣義語境之不同。那麼用於研究後者之現代方法則需更加審慎，並放棄絕對去脈絡化之單純本質論。最後，本文對基於苦難與存在轉化廣義概念的正念之存在語境重構，進行了初步的個案研究。

1. In the Wake of McMindfulness

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented surge of interest in mindfulness and mindfulness meditation. The number of studies on the nature, dynamics, and effects of mindfulness meditation has been growing exponentially (from 5 in 1990, through 21 in 2000, up to 353 in 2010),[1] and there has been an increasing interest in utilizing mindfulness to facilitate health, well-being, and personal development. Cognitive (neuro) science has reported on specific changes in the brain structure and activity in response to its application;[2] in medicine and psychotherapy, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are used in the treatment of various psychophysical disorders (from chronic pain and hypertension to insomnia, depression, and anxiety disorders);[3] finally, attempts have been made to introduce mindfulness meditation not only into educational and corrective facilities, but also into companies, government agencies, even military and police departments.[4]

1 David S. Black, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions: An Antidote to Suffering in the Context of Substance Use, Misuse, and Addiction," in *Substance Use & Misuse* 49, 5 (2015), pp. 487-491.

2 Alberto Chiesa & Alessandro Serretti, "A systematic review of neurobiological and clinical features of mindfulness meditations," *Psychological medicine* 40, 8 (2010), pp. 1239-1252; Jesse Edwards et al., "The Neurobiological Correlates of Meditation and Mindfulness," in: Moreira-Almeida A. & Santana Santos F. S. (ed.), *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship. Mindfulness in Behavioral Health* (New York: Springer: 2011), pp. 97-112; Yi-yuan,Tang et al., "The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 16 (2015), pp. 213-225.

3 Alberto Chiesa & Peter Malinowski, "Mindfulness-Based Approaches: Are They All the Same?" *Journal of clinical Psychology*, 67, 4 (2011), pp. 404-424; Paul Groosman et al., "Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 57 (2004), pp. 35-43; Peter Sedlmeier et al., "The Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 138, 6 (2012), pp. 1139–1171.

4 Ronald E. Purser, "The Militarization of Mindfulness," *Inquiring Mind* (2014), http://www.inquiringmind.com/Articles/MilitarizationOfMindfulness.html; Sebastian Sauser and Niko Kohls, "Mindfulness in Leadership: Does Being Mindful Enhance Leaders' Business Success?" in Han, Shihuhi & Pöpper, Erns, *Culture and Neural Frames of Cognition and Communication* (New York: Springer, 2010), pp. 287-307; Elisabeth Stanley, & Amishi Jha, "Mind Fitness: Improving Operational Effectiveness and Building Warrior Resilience," *Joint Force Quarterly,* 55 (2009), pp. 144-151.

More recently, however, these developments have given rise to heated debates in academia (see especially two special issues dedicated to the topic in *Contemporary Buddhism* [12 (1), 2011] and *Mindfulness* [6 (1), 2015]) and the scientific / therapeutic "blogosphere"[5] on possible misconstruals and misappropriations of mindfulness. In addition to the media hype and overblown claims that frequently accompany mindfulness studies,[6] critics have been especially vocal about the dangers of so-called "mystification of mindfulness,"[7] a process in which mindfulness is extracted from its traditional religious, philosophical, and ethical framework and transformed into something more palatable to the *Weltanschauung* of the secular Western world. Getting rid of the "traditional baggage" may have made modern versions of mindfulness more enticing to the average Westerner, but it has also brought about a host of serious difficulties: In addition to conceptual ambiguities and methodological challenges,[8] it has been suggested that contemporary appropriations substantially diverge from traditional definitions and practices;[9] that they make uncritical use of, and frequently misinterpret, central Buddhist concepts;[10] that they ignore or trivialize other

5 Kevin Healy, "Searching for Integrity: The Politics of Mindfulness in the Digital Economy," *Nomos Journal* (2013), http://nomosjournal.org/2013/08/searching-for-integrity/; Purser, Ronald E. Purser & David Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *Huffington Post* (2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html; Thomas Rocha, "The Dark Night of the Soul," *The Atlantic* (25. 6. 2014), http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/the-dark-knight-of-the-souls/372766/; Seth Zuiho Segall, "In Defense of Mindfulness," *Existential Buddhist* (2013), http://www.existentialbuddhist.com/2013/12/in-defense-of-mindfulness/.

6 Catherine Kerr, "Why Do Studies of Meditation and of the Brain Matter?" *Huffington Post* (2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/catherine-kerr/why-do-studies-of-meditat_b_6075664.html; Ronald E. Purser, "Clearing the Muddled Path of Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness: A Response to Monteiro, Musten, and Compson," *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015a), p. 33.

7 Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

8 Alberto Chiesa & Peter Malinowski, "Mindfulness-Based Approaches: Are They All the Same?" *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 67, 4 (2011), pp. 404-424; Dusana Dorjee, "Kinds and Dimensions of Mindfulness: Why it is Important to Distinguish Them," *Mindfulness* 1, 3 (2010), pp. 152-160.

9 Rupert Gethin, "On Some Definitions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12, 1 (2011), pp. 263-279; Andrew Olendzki, "The Construction of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), pp. 55-70.

10 Alan B. Wallace, *Meditations of a Buddhist Sceptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

(particularly ethical) aspects of Buddhist practice;[11] and that they therefore run the risk of not only incorrigibly distorting the original practice, but also of exposing its practitioners to inadvertent harm.[12] "McMindfulness,"[13] as these contemporary trends are sometimes collectively called, is said to have become a puppet in the hands of corporate capitalism: the revolutionary impetus of Buddha's teaching (Dharma) has been watered down and transformed into a self-help method promulgating uncritical, docile, and subservient attitude among employees and guardians of the existing "law and order."

In our paper, we try to approach this predicament from a somewhat different angle. To begin with, we intend to show that what critics of contemporary mindfulness often neglect is the fact that Buddhism is *not* a *uniform* entity, but a "dynamic, pluralistic and even quarrelsome set of cultural traditions."[14] Traditionally-minded criticism is usually rooted in *Abhidamma* Buddhism and tends to ignore the contribution of other (particularly Northern and East Asian) Buddhist traditions. Drawing on recent work on *Mahāmudrā* in Tibetan Buddhism and early Chan in Chinese Buddhism, we argue that some of the recent modifications of mindfulness have telling historical precedents, and that this, in turn, has important implications for contemporary (re)appropriations and (re)conceptualizations of mindfulness. Specifically, it is claimed that the inclusion of Northern and East Asian Buddhist traditions provides us with a more nuanced conception of what we mean by "contextualization" ("framing") and allows us to distinguish between the *narrow* context of *formal* practice (*during*

11 Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Meditation as Medicine: A Critique," *Cross Currents* 60, 2 (2010), pp. 168-184; Ronald E. Purser, "Clearing the Muddled Path of Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness: A Response to Monteiro, Musten, and Compson," *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015a), pp. 23-45; Ronald E. Purser, "The Myth of the Present Moment," *Mindfulness* 6, 3 (2015b), pp. 680-686.

12 Patricia L. Dobkin et al., "For Whom May Participation in a Mindfulness-based stress Reduction be Contraindicated?" *Mindfulness* 3, 1 (2011), pp. 44-50.

13 Ronald E. Purser and Loy, David Loy "Beyond McMindfulness," *Huffington Post* (2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html.

14 Anne Harrington & John Dunne (forthcoming), "Mindfulness Meditation: Frames and Choices," *American Psychologist*, pp. 1-27, https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/10718406/46521719.pdf?sequence=1, p. 2.

meditation sessions) and the *broad* context of *informal* practice (*between* meditation sessions). We argue that contemporary approaches need to take more heed of the latter and give up on the naïve essentialist notion of absolute decontextualization. We then close the discussion by offering a tentative suggestion for an existentialist (re)contextualization of mindfulness based on a broader conception of suffering that would shift the emphasis of meditation practice from the mere epistemological change back to (deeper) ontological transformation.

2. The Mindful Sniper: Mindfulness Decontextualized

What is it about contemporary conception of mindfulness that supposedly makes it incompatible with traditional accounts? The first thing to note is that, just as there is no one Buddhist view on mindfulness, there is no one *definite* contemporary definition of mindfulness. However, despite the heterogeneity of views, there does seem to exist, at least in the scientific and therapeutic literature, "something close to a consensus"[15] – and it is this generally agreed-upon conception that critics object to. For instance, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the first, and arguably still the best-known MBI, the so-called *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR), famously described mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."[16] Expanding on this rather terse construal, Bishop et al. put forward a more elaborate definition:

> Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which

15 Georges Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centred and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), p. 43.

16 Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), p. 4.

> each thought, feeling or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is.[17]

Mindfulness, then, is often used as a synonym for "bare attention" – a sort of open, non-discriminative and non-judgmental attending to the ongoing, moment-to-moment flow of consciousness. However, and as already noted above, this construal has met with fierce criticism, especially on account of its disregard for the historical context in which mindfulness originally developed and the removal of mindfulness from its ethical framework.[18] The two points are, as we will see shortly, closely intertwined, and are usually integrated into a single argument.

Thus, it is claimed that, in order to be able to attain the appropriate understanding of mindfulness, one must become familiar with the *broader context* in which it emerged.[19] This context is said to be largely determined by the *Four Noble Truths* (or *The Four Truths of the Noble Ones*): (1) human existence is characterized by suffering or unpleasantness (Pāli dukkha); (2) the origin of suffering is craving or desire (Pāli taṇhā); (3) the cessation of suffering is attainable through the cessation of craving; (4) the way to cessation of suffering is the *Noble Eightfold Path*, consisting of wisdom (Pāli paññā) (right view, right intention), ethics (Pāli sīla) (right speech, right action, right livelihood), and concentration (Pāli samādhi) (right effort, right concentration, *right mindfulness*). Two things are of particular interest here. First, mindfulness (Pāli sati; Skt. smṛti) is only *one* of the aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path; and second, just like the other seven aspects, it is qualified by the adjective "*sammā*," which is normally translated as "right," (the opposite of "wrong") but actually

17 Scott Bishop et al., "Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11, 3 (2004), p. 232.

18 Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Meditation as Medicine: A Critique," *Cross Currents* 60, 2 (2010), pp. 173, 179.

19 Lynette M. Monteiro et al., "Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness: Finding the Middle Path in the Tangle of Concerns," *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015), pp. 2-3.

carries a wide range of meanings: “attuned,” “balanced,” “complete,” “perfect,” “upright,” “wholesome.”[20]

In addition to *sammā sati* or *right* (attuned, etc.) mindfulness there can also be *micchā sati* or *wrong* (not attuned, etc.) mindfulness, i.e. mindfulness which *does not alleviate*, but actually *exacerbates* suffering (Stanley 2015: 103).[21] But as pointed out by Sharf, there seems to be very little that is “bare” or “non-judgmental” in traditional accounts of *sammā sati*.[22] To begin with, the notion of mindfulness in classical *Abhidhamma* Buddhism preserves links to the original meaning of the term *sati*, which is “memory” or “remembering.”[23] This is true in two senses: In the *narrow* sense, mindfulness is associated with *working memory*, and refers to the ability of the mind to attend closely to a given object and prevent it from drifting away to some other object,[24] in the *broad* sense, the ties with memory are even more explicit, and the term refers to the capacity to “recollect one’s larger sense of purpose, one’s spiritual goals, and especially the ethical framework within which practice occurs.”[25] However, the story does not end here. *Sati* in the *Abhidhamma* Buddhism is described not only as *retentive* and *recollective* (and therefore different from present-centered awareness), but also as *explicitly evaluative*[26]: it recognizes wholesome mental states as

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20 Ajahn Amaro, “A Holistic Mindfulness,” *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015), p. 64; Mikulas, William L., “Ethics in Buddhist Training,” *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015), p 15; Andrew Olendzki, “The Construction of Mindfulness,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), p. 64.

21 In the *Abhidhamma* tradition, all wrong (not attuned, etc.) actions are said to strengthen three “unwholesome roots” (Pāli *akusala-mūla*): ignorance (Pāli *moha*), desire (Pāli *lobha*), and aversion (Pāli *dosa*).

22 Robert H. Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? And Why it Matters,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2014a), p. 943.

23 But see Bhikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), pp. 19-39, for a more nuanced account.

24 Georges Dreyfus, “Is Mindfulness Present-Centred and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), p. 51.

25 Anne Harrington & John Dunne (forthcoming), “Mindfulness Meditation: Frames and Choices,” *American Psychologist*, pp. 1-27, https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/10718406/46521719.pdf?sequence=1, p. 18. See Rupert Gethin, “On Some Definitions of Mindfulness,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), p. 270.

26 Georges Dreyfus, “Is Mindfulness Present-Centred and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness,” p. 51.

wholesome and unwholesome mental states as unwholesome, embracing the former and shunning the latter.[27] There is, in other words, an explicitly *ethical* element inherent in the classical account of mindfulness.

The Noble Eightfold Path is usually depicted as the eight-spoke *Wheel of Dharma* (Pāli dhammacakka), symbolizing the idea that all 8 spikes are necessary for the proper functioning of its constitutive elements. From this it follows that, if *sati* is to become *sammā sati*, it must be integrated into a broader "web of factors" (other 7 spikes) that provide it with direction, meaning, and purpose.[28] If mindfulness is isolated from its overall, particularly *ethical*, context, as is the case with contemporary approaches, it risks becoming seriously distorted. And this, as the traditionally-minded critics point out, may have particularly grave consequences if mindfulness is transmitted into, or appropriated by, contexts that seem to be incongruent with Buddhist ethics, such as corporations, the military, and the police. Here, the threat of misuse and misappropriation seems to be the most pertinent, as is vividly portrayed by the metaphors of "mindful sniper" and "mindful zombie." A *mindful sniper* is a person who has acquired great proficiency in cultivating "bare attention," but uses this capacity for purposes that are in obvious disagreement with Buddhist ethical standards, e.g. to improve their military skills.[29] A *mindful zombie* is a "corporative complement" to the mindful sniper and stands for someone who passively and non-judgmentally accepts the rapacious logic of the corporate world. In these contexts, mindfulness becomes a means to an end (e.g. a method for improving concentration, productivity, stress-resilience, etc.), whose substance is usually determined by political and/or economic interests.[30] Wilson

27 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," in Ostafin, Brian D., Robinson, Michael D. & Meier, Brian P., *Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation* (New York: Springer, 2015), p. 257; Rupert Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Leiden, New York: Brill's Indological Library, 1992), p. 39.

28 Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective," p. 31.

29 Matthieu Ricard, "A Sniper's Mindfulness," (2009), http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/a-sniper-s-mindfulness.

30 Ronald E. Purser, "Clearing the Muddled Path of Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness: A Response to Monteiro, Musten, and Compson," (2015a), pp. 39-40.

even speaks of "laissez-fare mindfulness,"[31] which – usually under the pretense of "ethical neutrality" – uncritically adopts values promulgated by the free-market economy (individuality, competitiveness, unbridled productivity, etc.).

To this it might be objected that such an account hardly does justice to contemporary approaches, whose main goal is actually quite similar, if not identical, to that of traditional approaches, namely *alleviating suffering*. In this respect, the "rhetoric of authenticity"[32] may actually prove disruptive for collaborative efforts and may turn out to be a hindrance in achieving this overarching common goal.[33] However, critics have been quick to note that these alleged similarities are superficial at best. Specifically, it has been suggested that the Buddhist conception of suffering is *much broader* than the one put forward by most contemporary MBIs. For instance, Purser maintains that it is possible to distinguish three "forms" or "levels" of suffering in traditional Buddhist accounts: (a) *the suffering of suffering* (Pāli dukkha-dukkha): a "gross level of suffering" pertaining to the unpleasantness of birth, illness, old age, and dying, and to anxiety, depression, and pain that usually accompany these ineliminable aspects of human existence; (b) *the suffering of change* (Pāli viparinama-dukkha): a "second-level" suffering related to the realization of the transitory and impermanent nature of all phenomena; and (c) *the suffering of conditioned existence* or *all-pervasive suffering* (Pāli sankhara-dukkha): a "third-level" of suffering, characterized by "deep existential suffering, or angst," a "sense of lack" or a "primal fear that [one's] self may be groundless, empty, and devoid of permanent and separate identity."[34] From the *Abhidhamma* perspective, contemporary MBIs recognize and address only the *first* form of suffering,

31 Ronald E. Purser, "The Militarization of Mindfulness," *Inquiring Mind* (2014), p. 194.

32 Georges Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centred and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," p. 42; John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 252.

33 Lynette M. Monteiro et al., "Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness: Finding the Middle Path in the Tangle of Concerns," pp. 10-12; Jake H. Davis, "Facing Up the Question of Ethics in Mindfulness-Based Interventions," *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015), pp. 47-48.

34 Ronald E. Purser, "The Myth of the Present Moment," (2015b), pp. 680-681.

whereas they are largely ignorant of the remaining two forms. However, in order to prevent, and ultimately subdue, the pangs of existential fire, it will not do to simply extinguish the flames (a); one must also remove the embers (b) and the tinder (c). MBIs may provide for an *epistemological*, but *not* for an *ontological* shift in one's being, i.e. they can engender changes in behavior based on a more appreciative and aesthetically open stance towards one's ordinary experiences, but they do not lead to a radical personal transformation, because there is "no radical questioning of the nature of what we hold to be true."[35]

3. Faces of Mindfulness: Classical vs. Non-Dual Conceptions

All these considerations seem to imply that there is little in common between contemporary and traditional Buddhist approaches to mindfulness. However, there are reasons to believe that such black-and-white conclusions are exaggerated. Specifically, it has been argued that "the Buddhist tradition is not monolithic" but "exhibits great diversity,"[36] and that there is therefore "no single authoritative Buddhist account of mindfulness."[37] In other words, although it might be true that there are important differences between contemporary approaches to mindfulness and *certain strands* of Buddhism (notably, those related to the *Abhidhamma* Buddhism), this *does not* mean that there are no alternative conceptions of mindfulness *within* Buddhism (notably, those developed in Northern and East Asian Buddhism), which may align more closely with contemporary approaches. In what follows, I will draw on recent work by Dunne[38] and Sharf[39] on the *Mahāmudrā* in Tibetan Buddhism and the early

35 Ibid., p. 681.

36 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), pp. 71-72.

37 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 252.

38 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," (2011); John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," (2015).

39 Sharf, Robert H., "Is Mindfulness Buddhist? And Why it Matters," *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2014a), pp. 1-12; Sharf, Robert H., "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan,"

Chan in Chinese Buddhism, respectively, to show why "authenticity claims" of the more-traditionally inclined critics might be problematic.

Before proceeding to the main subject, however, two preliminary remarks are in order. First, it is inaccurate to accuse MBSR and other MBIs of distorting or diluting the classical Buddhist conception of mindfulness, because such criticisms assume that there is a direct relationship between the two approaches, i.e. that the former is merely a watered-down version of the latter.[40] However, this does not seem to be the case, as contemporary approaches proved to be very eclectic in their selection of sources and influences. Kabat-Zinn, for instance, has pointed out that, in addition to the *Abhidhamma* Buddhism, MBSR was also greatly influenced by *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, particularly Zen, as well as certain Yogic traditions and the teachings of J. Krishnamurti and Ramana Maharshi.[41] Secondly, and relatedly, even authors who emphasize important differences between contemporary and classical approaches often admit that these distinctions are not as clear-cut as is often assumed. For instance, Dreyfus contends that, although characterizations of mindfulness as "present-centered non-judgmental awareness" do not occupy the central place in Buddhism, they are still "not alien to the tradition."[42] Similarly, Olendzki, in comparing the Pāli *Abhidhamma* tradition with the Sanskrit *Abhidharma* tradition, points out that, although similar in most respects, the latter contains some features (e.g. pronounced innateist tendencies; see below) that make it more in line with non-dual and contemporary conceptions.[43]

To get a better overview of different approaches to mindfulness, Dunne proposes that we arrange individual Buddhist traditions along what might be

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Philosophy East & West, 64, 4 (2014b), pp. 933-964.

40 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 253.

41 Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12, 1 (2011), p. 289.

42 Georges Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centred and Non-Judgmental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," p. 44.

43 Andrew Olendzki, "The Construction of Mindfulness," p. 67.

called an *innateist / constructivist* spectrum.[44] The proposed classificatory criterion concerns the following question:

> [W]hat is the continuity between an ordinary mind and the mind of a Buddha? [T]o what extent are the qualities of buddhahood or awakening (*bodhi*) present in an ordinary person?[45]

On the one end of the spectrum, we find *constructivists* who maintain that *very few qualities* of awakening are present and that the progress along the Buddhist path entails "eliminating *obstructions*" and "carefully acquiring or constructing appropriate qualities that eventually result in buddhahood." On the other end of the spectrum, we find *innateists* who argue that *most* or even *all* qualities of awakening are present and that the progress along the path requires "eliminating the *obscurations* that prevent our innate buddhahood from emerging."[46] According to this classification, *Abhidhamma* Buddhism, along with its classical conception of mindfulness, falls squarely in the constructivist camp; but there are other approaches – found particularly, but not exclusively, in the *Mahāmudrā* and *Dzogchen* traditions of Tibet, as well as in Chinese Chan, Japanese Zen and Korean Seon[47] – that diverge significantly from the *Abhidhamma* views.

Both innateist and constructivist approaches start off from the general framework of the Four Noble Truths, but disagree in what constitutes the *root cause* of suffering. For constructivists, craving or desire (Skt. tṛṣṇā) that is said to produce suffering (2nd Noble Truth) ultimately stems from *distorted cognitions*. The main goal of the Buddhist path (4th Noble Truth), then, is to eradicate distorted cognitions (e.g. our belief in the permanence of things or the existence

44 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," pp. 75-79.
45 Ibid., p. 75.
46 Ibid., pp. 75-76; emphases added.
47 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 259; Robert H. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," *Philosophy East & West* 64, 4 (2014b), p. 944.

of the autonomous self) and replace them with wholesome qualities and capacities (e.g. compassion, clear comprehension).[48] For innateists, on the other hand, the root of suffering lies at a deeper level and has to do with the fundamental *subject-object distinction*, i.e. with the notion of "a distinct subjectivity standing over against distinct objects of experience"[49] It is this duality of knowing subject vs. known object (Skt. grāhyagrāhakadvaya) that is said to be the ultimate source of distorted cognitions and consequently of craving and suffering in general. Cessation of suffering cannot be attained by the (progressive) eradication of unwholesome and cultivation of wholesome mental states, but by the (sudden) realization of the state of non-dual wisdom (Skt. advayajñāna), which is continually (if dimly) present in our everyday experience in the form of reflexive awareness (Skt. svasaṃvitti).[50] Unlike the classical "constructivist" accounts, where *all* conscious states, including all liberative meditative states, necessarily have a subject-object structure, the "innateist" approaches tend to emphasize the importance of states that precede, and thus transcend, the dual mode of experiencing.

(1) Mere Non-Distraction: Mindfulness in *Mahāmudrā*

So, how does this shift in the overall background influence the construal of the nature and dynamics of mindfulness? In search for the appropriate answer to this question, our first "case study" will be *Mahāmudrā* (Skt. for "Great Seal"),

> a tradition that emerges at the end of the first millennium from various sources, including developments within the epistemological approach of Yogācarā and tantric contemplative methods, [and whose] literature is

48 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 255.
49 Ibid., p. 259.
50 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," p. 73; John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 261.

> especially useful for the way it *strikes a deliberate stance in opposition* to the Classical [Abhidhamma] paradigm.[51]

For instance, Maitrīpa (11th century), one of the most important proponents of *Mahāmudrā* in Indian Buddhism, argues that what must be cultivated in meditation is not mindfulness (Skt. smṛti) and attention (Skt. manasikāra), but rather *non-mindfulness* (Skt. asmṛti) and *non-attention* (Skt. amanasikāra).[52] But why, one may wonder, is such radical inversion needed? It will be remembered that, according to the classical ("constructivist") *Abhidhamma* account, mindfulness comprises evaluative, judgmental, and recollective aspects; yet, according to the non-dualist ("innateist") account, these aspects remain rooted in the subject-object duality and are therefore constitutive of ignorance (Skt. avidyā).[53] Put differently, according to *Mahāmudrā*, cultivating mindfulness (in the classical sense of the term) *strengthens* the subject-object structure and *exacerbates* suffering.[54]

Because of the paucity of the Indian sources relating the specifics of the *Mahāmudrā* practice, Dunne turns to the Tibetan *Mahāmudrā*, or, more specifically, to *The Ocean of Definitive Meaning* by the 9th Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé (16th century). After elaborating on initial "preparatory practices" (Tib. sngon 'gro; more on these in the next section), Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé offers the following guideline as the common thread of the formal practice: "Do not pursue the past. Do not usher in the future. Rest evenly without present awareness, clear and nonconceptual."[55]

The first thing to note is that the instructions advise the meditators to cultivate *present-centered awareness*, not allowing themselves to get caught up in

51 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 262; (emphasis added).
52 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," p. 77.
53 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," pp. 262-263.
54 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," p. 77.
55 Ibid., p. 80.

thoughts about the past or future. Secondly, and more generally, the meditator is directed to *stop all conceptualizations*, be it of the past, present or future, and simply rest in the state of clear awareness. That is to say, “resting” in “present awareness” is not the same as *thinking* of being in the present, but refers to *embodying* (manifesting) this on-going present-centeredness.[56]

Later, Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé ushers in additional tools that may help the practitioner in realizing this general maxim. Thus, one is instructed to (i) give up any deliberate effort and simply “let go” (Tib. lhod kyis glod); not to (ii) correct or “repair” (Tib. bcos) the mind; and not to (iii) have any hopes or expectations. Instead, one should simply allow one’s mind to “rest in a relaxed, open and clear way in a state of mere non-distraction without making any judgments at all.”[57] The crux of the practice is in not thinking of anything or trying to achieve anything – not even trying to meditate! In this regard, Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé quotes approvingly the words of a well-known Indian *Mahāmudrā* adept Tilopa (10th-11th century):

> Not pondering.
> Not thinking.
> Not wondering.
> Not meditating.
> Not analyzing.
> Just place the mind in its natural state.[58]

In this context, the notion of mindfulness (Tib. dran pa) is not construed as an evaluative and retentive/recollective faculty that preserves focused attention on a given object, but rather as “a capacity to sustain awareness without becoming

56 Ibid., p. 81.
57 Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé in John Dunne, “Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach,” p. 264.
58 John Dunne, “Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness,” p. 81.

caught in thoughts."[59] Karmapa Wanchûg Dorjé terms this capacity "mindfulness consisting in mere non-distraction" (Tib. ma yengs tsam gyi dran pa), where "mere non-distraction" stands for clear and effortless awareness free of judgment and contrivance.[60]

(2) Between Mind and No-Mind: Mindfulness in the Early Chan Tradition

Further insight into alternative Buddhist conceptions of mindfulness is provided by Sharf's illuminative study[61] on meditative practices in the early Chan (Jpn. Zen) tradition (7th-9th century). At the very outset, Sharf points out that very little is known about the specifics of meditation practices in the early Chan, which is peculiar for a tradition that has become renowned as a "meditation" school of East Asia (chan derives from Skt. dhyāna, meditation);[62] The common scholarly response to this hiatus has been to "disaggregate rhetoric from practice," i.e. to claim that "the early Chan was not, at least initially, an independent school or tradition," but rather "a 'meta-discourse' or 'meta-critique'" that "did not tinker with existing practices or institutional forms so much as […] with the doctrines underwriting these practices."[63] Put differently, it has been claimed that there are few accounts of the early Chan meditation practices because these remained more or less the same as in the preceding periods; instead, the focal point of Chan critique lay elsewhere, namely in "mythology, doctrine, and literary style."[64]

Sharf, however, feels this cannot be the whole story. Instead, he argues that the comparative silence in regard to meditative practice must be elucidated in light of the early Chan masters' persistent struggles to design meditative

59 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 265.
60 John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," p. 84.
61 See Robert H. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," *Philosophy East & West* 64, 4 (Oct. 2014).
62 Ibid., p. 933.
63 Ibid., p. 934.
64 Ibid., p. 938.

techniques that would be more in tune with the central *Mahāyāna* concepts, especially with the notion that there is no distinction between "means and ends, path and goal, meditation (dhyāna) and wisdom (prajñā)."[65] The innateist doctrine of inherent Buddha-nature (Chin. foxing 佛性) made it difficult for the early Chan proponents to explicitly argue for the adoption of this or that style of meditation, as any talk of technique already presupposes a duality between means (path) and ends (goal). Hence, the relative paucity of explicit references to the actual meditative practice does not, in itself, prove that monks did not engage in meditation, but could just as easily indicate the "rhetorical taboo" of prescribing and/or discussing such practices.[66] In fact, Sharf claims that there is evidence that at least some of the early Chan masters engaged in spirited debates about the appropriate alternatives to classical meditative practices.

When Chan Buddhism started striking root in Chinese soil, there was already a plethora of different meditative techniques present that had come to China from India in the 1st and 2nd century. These meditation techniques included:[67] meditations on impurity (Chin. bujingguan 不淨觀, Skt. aśubha-bhāvanā), breathing meditations (Chin. anban 安般, Skt. ānāpāna), cultivation of the four immeasurable states (Chin. si wuliang xin 四無量心, Skt. catvāri-apramāṇāni), recollection of the Buddha (Chin. nianfo 念佛), recitation of the Buddha's names (Chin. foming 佛名), etc.[68] But, as Sharf points out, early Chan texts, particularly those associated with the East Mountain and Northern Chan masters

> tended to deprecate or even reject such techniques. In their place they championed a distinctive practice, or cluster of similar practices, that

65 Ibid., p. 937.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., pp. 937-938.
68 See Mario Poceski, "Conceptions and Attitudes towards Contemplative Practice within the Early Traditions of Chan Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 28 (2015), pp. 67-117, for a comprehensive overview.

> went by a number of related names, including 'maintaining mind' (shouxin 守心), 'maintaining unity' (shouyi 守意), 'pacifying the mind' (anxin 安心), 'discerning the mind' (guanxin 觀心), 'viewing the mind' (kanxin 看心), 'focusing the mind' (shexin 攝心), and so on.[69]

These practices were linked to a specific rendering of the innateist doctrine, according to which the inborn Buddha-nature is the same as the mind itself. Thus, instead of attending to "the transient *objects* of experience," one is now instructed to focus on "the apperceiving *subject*": it is only when we let go of the obstacles that obscure the inherent purity (luminosity) of mind that we may hope to realize our inborn Buddhahood. This shift of focus is captured by a set of symbols typical of the early Chan literature: the deluded mind is depicted as "a mirror covered by dust" or "a sun covered by clouds," and the role of meditative practice is to break through these obscurations and cultivate "the abiding luminosity of the mind or consciousness."[70] In the early 8th-century *Treatise on the Essentials of Cultivating the Mind* (Chin. Xiuxin yaolun 修心要論), a collection of the teachings of the 5th patriarch Hongren,[71] "mindfulness" (Chin. nian 念) is associated with the practice of "maintaining the mind," which is to be cultivated as follows:

> Make your body and mind pure and relaxed, utterly devoid of external objects. Sit properly with the body erect. Regulate the breath and concentrate the mind so it is not within you, not outside of you, and not in any intermediate place. Do this carefully and naturally, observing tranquilly but attentively; see how consciousness is always in motion, like flowing water, a glittering mirage, or [rustling] leaves that never cease. When you come to perceive this consciousness [...] [o]bserve

69 Robert H. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," p. 938.
70 Ibid., p. 939.
71 John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. 37.

> tranquilly and attentively, until the veils melt away and you abide in a vast, empty clarity. The flow of consciousness will cease of itself like a puff of wind.[72]

Soon, however, a host of embittered critiques emerged, arguing that such approaches remain entangled in the dualist web of thinking in that they still require the meditator to focus on some-*thing* and thereby *reify* the mind (make it into an-object-for-the-perceiver).[73] Put differently, it was claimed that the proponents of the "Buddha-nature is mind" doctrine simply "substitute one givenness (that of the mind) for another (the world)."[74] To counter these unwanted tendencies, the critics opted for a radically different strategy: instead of "maintaining mind," "discerning mind," and "mindfulness," one should cultivate "no mind" (Chin. wuxin 無心), "cutting off discernment" (Chin. jueguan 絕觀), and even, in a manner reminiscent of the *Mahāmudrā* tradition, "absence" (Chin. wusuo 無所) and "no mindfulness" (!) (Chin. wunian 無念) (ibid.: 945, 951). For instance, in the *Treatise on No Mind* (Chin. Wuxin lun 無心論) we read:

> There is no mind. […] You must simply observe intently and carefully: […] Is this in fact the mind or not? Is it inside or outside, or somewhere in between? As long as one looks for the mind in any of these three locations, one's search will end in failure. Indeed, searching for it anywhere will end in failure. That is exactly what is known as 'no mind'.[75]

And in reply to a query as to how one should practice no-mind, we find the following admonition:

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72 Robert H. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," p. 949; See John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Chan Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), p.130, for an alternative translation.

73 Robert H. Sharf, "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," pp. 948-949.

74 Ibid., p. 951.

75 Ibid., p. 946.

> Simply be wakeful with respect to all phenomena. 'No mind' itself is practice. There is no practice. Thus know that no mind is everything, and quiescent extinction is itself no mind.[76]

However, some of the advocates of the "Buddha-nature-is-mind" doctrine replied in kind and gave the proponents of the "no-mind gospel" a taste of their own medicine. Thus, as expounded in the already mentioned *Treatise on the Essentials of Cultivating the Mind* (Chin. Xiuxin yaolun 修心要論), those who "grasp mistakenly at emptiness" and are "intent on fixing the mind on no object" are said to inadvertently "give rise to a mind that thinks about awakening" and are therefore "unable to see clearly their buddha-nature."[77] In other words, approaches that opt for mind*less*ness instead of mind*ful*ness mistake *thinking* and *talking* about emptiness (*reifying the no*-mind) for *realizing* one's innate Buddhahood. They cling to absence, but fail to embody its (non)essence.

Yet, as Sharf rightly notes, it is all but clear whether these exchanges were "mere rhetoric aimed at mitigating the reification of mind [or no-mind]" or whether they reflected actual differences in meditation techniques.[78] What *is* clear, however, is that they involved attempts to find the most appropriate alternative to constructivist currents in Buddhism and put forward a coherent conceptual and practical framework of non-dualist innateism.

4. From a Closed Fist to an Open Hand: Mindful Re-Contextualized

So, where does this leave us? It would seem that, although diverging substantially from the ("constructivist") *Abhidhamma* account, contemporary

76 Ibid., p. 947.
77 Ibid., p. 949.
78 Ibid., p. 945.

approaches have close affinities to non-dualist (“innateist”) views on mindfulness as propounded in certain Northern and East-Asian traditions. And if we are willing to cede “authenticity” to the latter - as we should - there is no reason to deny it to the former. As pointed out by Dunne:

> Throughout history, whenever Buddhism emerges in new cultural contexts, new forms of Buddhism arise that draw in complex ways on multiple Buddhist traditions, and this certainly applies to the forms of Buddhist practice that are merging in Europe and North America. […] Claiming that MSBR, medieval Chinese Chan, or modern Burmese Vipassanā are somehow ‘inauthentic’ because they emerge from multiple influences requires one to deny the historical reality of change and transformation that characterizes all contemplative traditions.[79]

The most radical accusations of the “traditionalist” camp thus seem to rest on shaky grounds. But does this mean that their criticism is completely off the mark? Not necessarily. Namely, it has been suggested[80] that, in addition to the nature and dynamics of the *formal* meditation practice, we must also consider the nature and dynamics of the *informal* or “in-between” practice, i.e. the general guidelines on how to live (think, act, etc.) in the period *between* two formal sessions so as to establish an environment conducive to the aims and objectives of contemplative practice. And here, we *do* find telling differences between contemporary and traditional innateist approaches.

For example, a practitioner who wants to engage in the formal *Mahāmudrā* practice is first required to undergo an intensive training in a set of “preliminary practices,” which are then also rehearsed at the beginning of every meditation

79 John Dunne, “Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach,” p. 253.
80 See John Dunne, “Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach,” Anne Harrington & John Dunne (forthcoming), “Mindfulness Meditation: Frames and Choices,” *American Psychologist*, pp. 1-27; Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Mindfulness in Cultural Context,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, 4 (2015), pp. 447-469.

session. The main purpose of these practices is to instill "an intense concern for the suffering of [oneself and] others and a strong motivation to become capable of relieving that suffering."[81] Also, as a part of the overall *Mahāmudrā* tradition, the practitioner is required to adopt "a paradigm of the proper Buddhist life along with its ethical norms."[82] Although this paradigm, in contradistinction to the *Abhidhamma* tradition, is set aside *during* formal practice, this is only because it is believed that, *between* formal sessions, the specific nature of meditative practice will lead to the fruition of goals and values that are central to the wholesome Buddhist lifestyle. Thus, there exists a *delicate balance* between formal and informal aspects of the practice: even the most "iconoclastic" among the innateist approaches, i.e. approaches that eschew all conceptuality and normativity in formal practice, are *embedded in a specific framework* that provides the whole endeavor, at least initially, with purpose, orientation, and meaning. To put it simply, even if we claim that, in the end, language (conceptual structures, judgments, and beliefs, etc.) has to be transcended or discarded, we must account for this fact *in and through* language. In other words, even if the goal of our practice is *radical de-construction*, one must first *construct* a meaningful narrative that will *reconstruct* our previous beliefs and opinions so that we may sensibly strive towards the set goal.

What is often lacking in discussions about the (in)appropriateness of contemporary approaches to mindfulness, then, is a more nuanced take on what is actually meant by "context." On the one hand, it can refer to recollective, evaluative, etc. aspects that are said (not) to be integral to the formal practice ("narrow context"); on the other hand, it can denote a broader framework of values, purpose, and meaning into which such formal meditation practices are embedded ("broad context"). Take, for instance, Kabat-Zinn's MBSR. In his wish to produce a program that would "embody to whatever degree possible the dharma essence of the Buddha's teachings put into action" and make it accessible

81 John Dunne, "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach," p. 166.
82 Ibid.

"to mainstream Americans facing stress, pain, and illness," without being peremptorily dismissed "as Buddhist, 'New Age,' 'Eastern Mysticism,' or just plain 'flakey'," he probably did the right thing to opt for the more "innateist" approach to Buddhist meditation.[83] In the scientistic climate of the 1970s and 1980s, all attempts to incorporate Buddhist meditation, *in its traditional form*, into the medical establishment were doomed to failure. In order to make it more palatable for the mainstream scientific, therapeutic, etc. communities of the period, it had to be presented in a form appropriate for the secularized, rational, multicultural, and multiconfessional Western societies of the 2nd half of the 20th century: mindfulness meditation, construed in "minimalist" terms of "bare attention," seemed more than fit for the job.

On the other hand, mechanisms and implications of such re-framing were inadequately reflected. For example, when Kabat-Zinn states that the aim of his work was simply to "share the *essence* of meditation and yoga practices" and that the "American vocabulary" he used for this particular purpose "spoke to the *heart* of the matter, and didn't focus on the cultural aspects of the traditions out of which the dharma emerged,"[84] he gives the impression that contemporary conceptions of mindfulness constitute the *neutral* and *universal essence* of Buddhist meditation. Although it could be argued that this is *not* what Kabat-Zinn had in mind (at least not in such a crude and unqualified sense), as he explicitly points out that he never meant to "exploit, fragment, or decontextualize the dharma, but rather to *recontextualize* [!] it within the frameworks of science, medicine […], and healthcare so that it would be maximally useful to people who could not hear it or enter it through the more traditional dharma gates,"[85] his vague (and often contradictory) statements undoubtedly contributed to the spread of such views.

83 Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," p. 282.
84 Ibid., p. 287; emphases added.
85 Ibid., p. 288; emphasis in the original.

Absolute *de*contextualization is an illusion and often simply masks (implicit, tentative) *re*contextualization. As already mentioned above, the main difficulty with the supposedly "transhistorical" and "transcultural" contemporary conceptions of mindfulness is that they tend to uncritically (and often unconsciously) adopt historically-based beliefs, norms, and values prevalent in their society: instead of trying to find the most appropriate frame for mindfulness, they incorporate it, under the aegis of "ethical neutrality," into the ethical framework of the free-market economy. Thus, what is problematic in contemporary approaches, such as MSBR, is *not* their "innateist" understanding and practice of mindfulness meditation (*narrow* context), but rather their (implicit or explicit) conviction that this form of practice constitutes the vital essence of Buddhism and that therefore other elements can be discarded (*broad* context). This *asymmetry* between the narrow (formal) and broad (informal) context is vividly expressed by Ajah Chahn, when he compares the efforts of contemporary meditators, who, as he says, tend to practice meditation with great devotion, but typically refrain from following the standards of ethical conduct between meditation retreats, to those of a "thief who after he gets caught hires a clever lawyer to get him out of trouble," but as soon as he is out, he starts stealing again.[86] The exclusive focus on formal meditation can make us blind for large-scale (ethical, social, etc.) issues and thereby perpetuate injustices inherent in the system whose norms, values, etc. that we tacitly adopt.

However, it is highly unlikely that these potentially deleterious trends could be checked by a wholesale adoption of the *classical* Buddhist framework, as suggested by the more traditionally-minded critics. Instead, a two-step strategy is likely to prove more efficient: first, it is important to acknowledge and accept the indispensability of broader contextual factors, i.e. the fact that there is no context-free "essence" of mindfulness meditation and that mindfulness constitutes but *one* element in one's overall philosophical (spiritual, etc.) edifice;

86 Ajahn Amaro, "A Holistic Mindfulness," *Mindfulness* 6, 1 (2015), p. 17.

and secondly, greater care should be taken in examining and choosing the appropriate framework*s* (yes, plural - for why should there be *only one* legitimate framework?) for *contemporary* recontextualization of such practices. After all, and as pointed out by Davis, questions about what constitutes "right" (wholesome, etc.) mindfulness should not revolve around doctrinal orthodoxy, but rather about *what constitutes a good (wholesome, meaningful) life*.[87] In this sense, it may be wise to, first and foremost, consider the possibilities *not* of doctrinal or ethical (at least not in the sense of deontological ethics), but of *existential* (re)contextualization: how to meaningfully incorporate mindfulness meditation into the *broader horizon of the search for existential meaning in the 21st century*. One of the common threads in this existential and more mindful (!) (re)framing of mindfulness could be a gradual expansion of our current understanding of suffering so as to include not only typical mental afflictions (anxiety, depression, etc.; i.e. Pāli dukkha-dukkha), but also deeper existential concerns - concerns pertaining to elusive, impermanent, and transitory nature of ourselves and the world (i.e. Pāli viparinama-dukkha and sankhara-dukkha; see section 2) whose alleviation calls not only for minor epistemological shifts, but for *radical ontological transformation*.

It is perhaps unfortunate that mindfulness struck roots in the therapeutic setting in close association with behavioral and cognitive therapies. For while such therapies prove to be efficient in (at least short-term) symptom-reduction, their individualistic and biomedical conceptions of human nature generally deprive them of the resources to thematize and address deeper existential issues. For this reason, it might be worthwhile to examine possibilities for including mindfulness into contexts that show greater acuity for existential dimensions, e.g. Frankl's logotherapy, Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis, Yalom's and May's existential therapies, etc. What all these approaches have in common, is not only keener appreciation for fundamental existential concerns (dying, suffering,

87 Jake H. Davis, "Facing up the Question of Ethics in Mindfulness-Based Interventions," p. 47.

existential angst, etc.), but also the conviction that these concerns can be appropriately dealt with only by letting go of atomized, individualistic conceptions of human existence and by focusing on establishing and maintaining authentic relations with the world and others. This would provide mindfulness-based techniques with a framework that is much closer to the original Buddhist framework of the Four Noble Truths, and would therefore enable practitioners to construe and practice meditation in terms of not only symptom-reduction, but of *profound existential transformation* (ab-solution from suffering) on a both individual and social level.

In the weeks before his death, Buddha is believed to have said: "The *Tathāgata* has no closed fist of a teacher with respect to teaching."[88] Bhikkhu Bodhi interprets this to mean that we can "let anyone take from the *Dhamma* whatever they find useful":

> It is inevitable that mindfulness and other practices adopted from Buddhism will find new applications in the modern West, where worldviews and lifestyles are so different from those of southern and eastern Asia. If such practices benefit those who do not accept the full framework of Buddhist teaching, I see no reason to grudge them the right to take what they need. […] As long as they act with prudence and a compassionate intent, let them make use of the *Dhamma* in any way they can to help the others.[89]

The key to this compassionate and mindful (re)appropriation lies, we believe, in exploring different ways to steer the middle ground between "rhetoric of authenticity" and "rhetoric of 'bare attention'." We have argued that an important step in this direction could be taken by enlarging the focus of study to include not

88 Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective," p. 35.
89 Ibid.

only Southern (Abhidhamma), but also Northern (Tibetan) and East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) Buddhist traditions. These traditions may provide us with a better understanding of the nature of framing processes, which in turn may have great bearing on contemporary practices. Conclusions drawn in our discussion are, of course, mere preliminary sketches, and we can only hope that further research on both South as well as North and East Asian Buddhist traditions will reveal an even more refined and multi-layered picture of different construals and applications of mindfulness in Buddhism. What is particularly important in such an enterprise, however, is that Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist scholars do not get caught up in the ivory tower of their worldviews and/or areas of inquiry, but that they maintain an on-going, back-and-forth exchange with scientists and therapists interested in MBIs, with the aim of devising and utilizing frameworks for mindfulness and related practices that would most benefit those in need.♦

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