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Mindfulness for secular purposes: distortion or adaptation of the Buddha's teachings?

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Introduction

No Buddhist should remain indifferent to the fact that the second UN millennium goal, i.e., universal primary education, has not been achieved yet. However, Buddhists should be concerned not only with spreading primary education all over the world but also with improving the quality of education at all levels.

One specifically Buddhist way of improving the quality education worldwide would be integrating mindfulness meditation with the teaching of other subjects. Teaching mindfulness in primary, middle and high schools has already produced noticeable improvements in the performance of students and teachers.[1] Although there is

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1. For a useful review of recent research on the benefits of mindfulness meditation in primary, middle and high schools, see John Meiklejohn, Catherine Phillips, M. Lee Freedman, Mary Lee Griffin, Gina Biegel, Andy Roach, Jenny

a growing number of university courses that teach mindfulness meditation alongside other subjects, most university professors still remain skeptical about the benefits of integrating contemplative pedagogies in their courses.[2]

Buddhists from all countries and traditions should get more involved in this ongoing process of integrating mindfulness and other forms of meditation into education. However, in order to facilitate such integration, meditation needs to be secularized and taught in a way that does not alienate non-Buddhist and non-religious students. In other words, for mindfulness meditation to spread in schools across the world and improve the overall quality of education, it has to be presented as a secular, i.e., non-religious practice validated by scientific research. A secular approach to mindfulness is already spreading all over the western world, benefiting many people from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist backgrounds who otherwise would not be interested in practicing meditation.[3]

I would like to clarify that I am not suggesting that mindfulness has to be secularized in all contexts to improve the quality of education. For instance, Buddhist countries and Buddhist schools may not see any need to secularize mindfulness. I am simply saying that in order to spread the integration of mindfulness into education and improving the quality of education worldwide, it is necessary to present mindfulness as a secular and scientifically validated practice.

The question is whether a secular approach to mindfulness constitutes an adaptation or distortion of the Buddha's teachings

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Frank, Christine Burke, Laura Pinger, Geoff Soloway, Roberta Isberg, Erica Sibinga, Laurie Grossman, and Amy Saltzman, "Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students," in *Mindfulness*, Volume 3, Issue 4 (2012): 291-307.

2. Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies.* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011). Mirabai Bush, "Mindfulness in Higher Education" in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013).

3. Barry Boyce, ed., *The Mindfulness Revolution*, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2011).

that threats the future of traditional Buddhism. In order to address the difficult question of whether a secular approach to mindfulness is an adaptation or a distortion of the Buddha's teachings, this paper compares and contrasts early Buddhist understandings of mindfulness, i.e., mindfulness as it appears in the *Pāli Nikāyas*, and conceptions of mindfulness prevalent in scientific literature.

After comparing and contrasting Buddhist and secular approaches to mindfulness, the paper suggests that secular approaches to mindfulness are a double edged sword. Secular mindfulness may be a distortion or an adaptation of the Buddha's teachings depending on how it is taught in relationship with Buddhist right mindfulness.

If secular mindfulness is taught ignoring its Buddhist roots and underlying values, or as if it were identical to Buddhist right mindfulness, then we would be distorting the Buddha's teachings. However, if secularized mindfulness meditation is taught without ignoring its ethical dimension and its intrinsic relationship with other aspects of Buddhist right mindfulness, then we would be respecting the complexity of mindfulness and adapting the Buddha's teachings to new lands and new sensibilities.

Secular approaches to mindfulness

This section explains the secularized meaning of mindfulness prevalent in scientific literature. For the sake of simplicity, I call this scientific conception of mindfulness secular mindfulness. Most people tend to equate secular mindfulness with Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of it. Jon Kabat-Zinn is one of the founding figures of the contemporary mindfulness movement. Thanks primarily to Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness today is no longer an exotic eastern form of meditation but a widespread clinical practice to alleviate diverse illnesses[4].

Kabat-Zinn started the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979, and in 1995 he founded the

4. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living. Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society. There, he started the eight weeks MBSR or mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which today is offered in hospitals, medical centers and other health care institutions all over the world.

Kabat-Zinn offers two working definitions of mindfulness: "(a) paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally; (b) the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."[5]

There is, however, a more comprehensive operational definition of mindfulness developed in 2004 by a group of scientists from several universities led by Scott R. Bishop.[6] Although Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness is by far the most popular in western countries, the operational definition of mindfulness developed by Bishop & al, is the one that prevails among scientists. Nevertheless the definitions of Kabat-Zinn and Bishop & al overlap to a great extent. In fact, Bishop & al define mindfulness as "a kind of non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is."[7]

Similarly, like Kabat-Zinn, Bishop & al explain mindfulness as a dispassionate state of self-observation that creates a "space" between our perceptions and our responses to them; a state that observes thoughts and feelings as events in the mind "without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual

5. Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 291

6. Scott R. Bishop, Mark Lau, Shauna Shapiro, Linda Carlson, Nicole D. Anderson, James Carmody, Zindel V. Segal, Susan Abbey, Michael Speca, Drew Velting, and Geral Devins, "Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition," in *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice,* 11 (2004): 230-41.

7. Ibid., 232.

pattern of reactivity"[8].

Bishop & al, however, propose a two-component model of mindfulness. The first component involves the self-regulation of attention. That is, mindfulness regulates the focus of our attention by bringing awareness to our immediate experience in the present moment. This self-regulation of attention leads to "a feeling of being very alert to what is occurring in the here-and-now," a "feeling of being fully present and alive in the moment."

This type of awareness used to self-regulate attention is non-elaborative and nonjudgmental. This awareness limits itself to experience our thoughts, feelings, and sensations directly as they arise without getting caught in value judgments and ruminations about them. Once awareness acknowledges a thought, feeling, or sensation, it pays attention to the breath once again "thereby preventing further elaboration."

The cultivation of this first component of mindfulness involves: (a) sustained attention to the breath, (b) switching attention from thoughts, feelings and sensations back to the breath, and (c) inhibition of elaborative processing of such thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Because this non-elaborative and nonjudgmental awareness attempts to experience things directly as if for the first time, that is, without the filter of our beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and desires, mindfulness can be compared to the practice of what some Zen masters call the "beginner's mind."

The second component of mindfulness is a new orientation or relationship with our experience. This new relationship with our experience can be characterized by three qualities: curiosity, openness and acceptance. Curiosity means that we consider relevant and subject to observation everything that may arise in our field of awareness. Openness and acceptance refer to an attitude of receptivity to whatever we experience regardless of its valence and desirability.

8. Ibid., 232.

To sum up, Bishop & al understand mindfulness "as a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one's experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance." Bishop & al also relate mindfulness to the process of gaining insight, in their words: "We further see mindfulness as a process of gaining *insight* into the nature of one's mind and the adoption of a de-centered perspective on thoughts and feelings so that they can be experienced in terms of their subjectivity (versus their necessary validity) and transient nature (versus their permanence)."[9].

This curious, open, accepting, non-elaborative and nonjudgmental awareness performs three main functions: (a) observing and noticing each object in the stream of consciousness; (b) recognizing and discriminating among different elements of experience; whether it is a thought, a feeling, or a sensation, etc., (c) investigating the elements of one's experience and how one experience gives rise to another.

By performing the aforementioned functions of observing, noticing, recognizing, and investigating, mindfulness not only increases our emotional awareness but also our ability to see the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions, thus helping us to understand the nature and the causes of our experience and behavior. As Bishop & al put it, the practice of mindfulness helps us to realize that thoughts, feelings, and sensations are "passing events in the mind rather than inherent aspects of the self or valid reflections on reality."[10]

For Bishop & al, mindfulness is a mode or state-like quality of awareness. This mode of awareness can be learned and developed. In this sense, mindfulness is also a skill that we can cultivate with practice. More specifically, mindfulness can be considered a metacognitive skill because it controls cognitive processes, i.e., attention, and monitors the stream of consciousness, i.e., whatever thoughts, feelings, and sensations that happen in the present moment.

9. Ibid., 234.

10. Ibid., 234.

When we regulate our attention and become aware of our experience with curiosity, openness, and acceptance, but without judging and elaborating on what we experience, then we are evoking or cultivating mindfulness. Conversely, when attention is not regulated in the aforementioned way, then we are not evoking or cultivating mindfulness.

In order to evoke or cultivate mindfulness, meditation techniques are useful, but that does not mean that only meditation can evoke mindfulness. Once we have learned the skills involved in mindfulness, it can be evoked in many situations including the process of psychotherapy.

Bishop & al differentiate mindfulness from other qualities. Such qualities are best understood as outcomes of cultivating mindfulness rather than as components of mindfulness. Bishop & al speak of five qualities that usually result from the practice of mindfulness: patience, trust, calmness, wisdom, and compassion. They understand patience as the ability to allow things to unfold in their own time, trust as confidence in the ability to stay in contact with one's experience, calmness as non-reactivity, wisdom as self-knowledge, and compassion as empathy for oneself.[11]

Even though Bishop & al emphasize openness, acceptance, and a nonjudgmental awareness, this does not mean that mindfulness entails a passive attitude conducive to inaction. Quite the contrary, mindfulness approaches in psychotherapy are intended to modify the patient's conduct and the way she or he responds to thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Bishop & al, explain this intrinsically transformative aspect of mindfulness in this way: "Mindfulness approaches encourage patients to step out of the war with their thoughts and feelings and give up ineffective experiential avoidance strategies. The approach thus focuses on altering the impact of, and response to, thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The general orientation of mindfulness approaches is on helping clients to stay in contact with private experiences so that they can behave more effectively."[12]

11. Ibid., 235.

12. Ibid., 237.

The conception of mindfulness prevalent in scientific literature is a secularized and non-denominational form of mindfulness that can be practiced by people from all religious and cultural backgrounds as well as by those with secular sensibilities or without a particularly religious background. This secular approach to mindfulness does not require from anybody to endorse Buddhism or to become a Buddhist.

Given that everybody can cultivate secular mindfulness without having to practice Buddhism and without having to be a Buddhist, integrating mindfulness meditation into all levels of education should not be a problem. If it is a scientific fact that secularized mindfulness meditation improves the quality of education at different levels, there should not be grounds to oppose its global spreading.

The problem is what this secular approach to mindfulness does to Buddhism. Is secularized mindfulness a distortion of the Buddha's teachings or an adaptation of the Dhamma to new lands and non-Buddhist sensibilities? Before being in a position to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the depth and complexity of Buddhist approaches to mindfulness. In the next section I focus on the early Buddhist conception of mindfulness, that is, mindfulness as it appears in the *Pāli Nikāyas*. For the sake of simplicity I call this early conception of mindfulness the Buddhist approach to mindfulness. However, I do not deny that the concept of mindfulness evolves over time and that there are distinct Buddhist commentarial traditions that explain the particulars of mindfulness in slightly different ways.

The early Buddhist conception of mindfulness

The *Pāli* term for mindfulness is *sati* (Sanskrit, *smṛti*), which originally means remembering, recalling, or calling to mind. Although this original meaning of *sati* appears in the *Pāli Nikāyas*, the most common and specifically Buddhist understanding of *sati* relates this term to four sets of contemplative exercises called *satipaṭṭhāna*, usually translated as "establishments" or "foundations" of mindfulness. The main early sources for the *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises are the *Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta* (DN. II. 290-315), and the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (MN. I. 55-63).[13]

13. Some useful accounts of the four establishments of mindfulness from

The four stablishments or foundations of mindfulness involve: (1) contemplation of the body, which includes contemplation of the breathing process, bodily postures (walking, standing, sitting, lying down), bodily activities (looking, bending, stretching, eating, drinking, defecating, etc.,), bodily parts (from the bottom up and from the top down), four elements (earth, water, fire, air), and stages of decomposition. (2) Contemplation of sensations: whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; whether they are mundane (related to the five senses) or spiritual (unrelated to the five senses). (3) Contemplation of mind: the dominant mental factor or whether the mind is dominated by lust, hate, delusion; the type of mental state or whether the mind is collected, sublime, lofty, unsurpassable, quiet, liberated. (4) Contemplation of *dhammas*, technical term that in this context refers to diverse teachings and categorizations of experience (five hindrances, five aggregates, six senses and their objects, seven factors of enlightenment, four noble truths, noble eightfold path, five faculties).

Bhikkhu Bodhi explains mindfulness as a stance of observation or watchfulness towards one's own present experience. Bhikkhu Bodhi compares this stance to a "bending back" of the light of consciousness on the physical, sensory and psychological dimensions of the experiencing subject. This light illuminates the object and makes it vividly present to awareness so that it becomes available for clear cognition, scrutiny and discernment. Thus, the primary function of mindfulness is to vividly present objects. This aspect of mindfulness as vivid presentation allows us to connect the two primary meanings of *sati* in the *Nikāyas*: as memory and as lucid awareness of present happenings. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's words:

> "When the object being cognized pertains to the past—when it

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a Theravāda Buddhist perspective are Anānalayo, *Satipattana: The Direct Path to Realization*, (Birmingham: Windhorse, 2003); Bhante Gunaratana, *The 4 Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English*, (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012); Venerable U. Silananda, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1990); Rupert Gethin, "The Establishing of Midfulness" in *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2001), 29-68; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (London, England: Rider and Co, Ltd., 1962).

> is apprehended as something that was formerly done, perceived, or spoken—its vivid presentation takes the form of memory. When the object is a bodily process, like in-and-out breathing or the act of walking back and forth, or when it is a mental event like a feeling or thought, its vivid presentation takes the form of lucid awareness of the present."[14]

Bhikkhu Bodhi acknowledges that mindfulness performs other functions in relation to various forms of meditation, but he suggests that all these functions reinforce the characterization of mindfulness in terms of vivid presentation. What unites all types of mindfulness in different forms of meditation including contemplations of loving-kindness, the Buddha, death, and repulsiveness of the body is, from the side of the subject, the lucidity and vivacity of awareness; and from the side of the object, its vivid presentation.[15]

Another primary function of mindfulness besides making objects present to awareness in a vivid way is to guarantee right practice of the noble eightfold path. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's words, mindfulness functions as "a guarantor of correct practice of all the other path factors." For instance, in MN 117, there is a discussion of right and wrong versions of the first five factors of the noble eightfold path. Then it is said that right view, right effort and right mindfulness work in unison to make sure that each path factor is right, i.e., free from unwholesome states. In conjunction with right view, mindfulness helps us to discriminate between unwholesome and wholesome mental qualities and deeds. In conjunction with right effort, mindfulness helps us to remove the unwholesome and acquire the wholesome.

For Bhikkhu Bodhi, this ethical function of mindfulness as the guarantor of correct practice renders problematic conceptions of mindfulness as devoid of discrimination, evaluation and judgment. Bhikkhu Bodhi acknowledges that, on certain occasions, mindfulness does not involve discrimination, evaluation and judgment. But as an

14. Bhikku Bodhi, *What does Mindfulness Really Mean*, in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25-26.

15. Ibid., 26.

integral member of the noble eightfold path, right mindfulness is inseparable from right view and right effort, and that may require from the practitioner of mindfulness to evaluate, judge, and intentionally engage our experiences, thoughts and actions.

Tse-Fu Kuan's excellent research on mindfulness in early Buddhism also demonstrates that Buddhist mindfulness perform an ethical function often inseparable from discrimination, evaluation and judgment.[16] Tse-Fu Kuan relates mindfulness to the aggregate of *saññā*, commonly translated as perception, though he prefers to translate it as apperception or conception. The aggregate of perception recognizes or identifies objects, which presupposes conceptualization, discrimination and memory.

According to Tse-Fu Kuan, the primary function of mindfulness is to direct perceptions in a proper way and "the practice of *sati* consists in developing correct and wholesome cognition, a perfect and undistorted form of *saññā*"[17]. In other words, mindfulness prevents perceptions from going astray to unwholesome emotions and conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), a technical term that refers to the tendency to generate misconceptions by projecting concepts associated to the attitudes "I" and "mine," into our sensory data. This in turn leads to further misconceptions. In Tse-Fu Kuan's words: "While *saññā* associated with unskillful/unwholesome (*akusala*) consciousness produces "memories" as misconceptions, the misconceptions will in turn bring about "recognition" or "apperception" of incoming sensory data in a misleading way. This is a vicious cycle."[18]

Following Rupert Gethin, Tse-Fu Kuan suggests that the primary meaning of mindfulness has to do with a particular type of remembering. This particular type of remembering presupposes discrimination. For instance, Tse-Fu Kuan (SN 48:9,10) defines

16. Tse-Fu Kuan, *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism: New Approach through Psychology and Textual Analysis of Pali, Chinese, and Sanskrit Sources*, (London: Routledge, 2008).

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid., 14.

mindfulness not only in terms of remembering but also in the terms of discrimination:

> "And what, Bhikkhus, is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and discrimination (*satinekkapa*), one who remembers and recollects (*saritā anussaritā*) what was done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of mindfulness"

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, however, the primary meaning of mindfulness is not related to remembering. For Bhikkhu Bodhi, there are three stages in the meaning of *sati* in the *Pāli Nikāyas*. In the first stage, *sati* means remembering or recollecting. For instance, (SN 48:9; AN 5:14; AN 7:4) defines the faculty of mindfulness exclusively in terms of memory. In the second stage, a new, specifically Buddhist meaning of *sati* is added to the original meaning, i.e., *sati* as the four establishments of mindfulness. For instance, (SN 48:10) expands the aforementioned text with the standard formula of the four establishments of mindfulness:

> "And what, Bhikkhus, is the faculty of mindfulness? Here, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and discrimination, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. He dwells contemplating the body as the body…sensations as sensations, mind as mind…*dhammas* as *dhammas*, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness"

In the third and the final stage, only the new, specifically Buddhist meaning remains. For instance, (SN 48:11) defines *sati* exclusively in terms of the four establishments of mindfulness:

> "And what, Bhikkhus, is the faculty of mindfulness? The mindfulness that one obtains on the basis of the four establishments of mindfulness. This is called the faculty of mindfulness"

For Bhikkhu Bodhi, the new, specifically Buddhist meaning of *sati*

as mindfulness prevails and replaces the original meaning of *sati* as memory, thus for him, "it would be a fundamental mistake to insist in reading the old meaning of memory into the new context." Here, however, I prefer to interpret the meaning of *sati* as mindfulness or vivid presentation and the meaning of *sati* as remembering are intertwined.

Mindfulness ensures that our perceptions are not associated with unwholesome mental states (conceptual proliferation, emotional agitation, craving, etc.,), and this ethical function of mindfulness cannot take place without remembering certain ideals or standards considered wholesome and without discriminating between such ideals or standards and what falls short of the wholesome. That is, if it is true that mindfulness performs an ethical function, i.e., preventing, counteracting and fostering the wholesome, then the old meaning of *sati* as memory is inseparable from the new meaning of *sati* as mindfulness.

Despite the aforementioned minor disagreement between Bhikkhu Bodhi and Tse-Fu Kuan about the primary meaning of *sati*, I think that their respective accounts of mindfulness complement each other. What seems uncontroversial is that the aspect of *sati* as remembering and the aspect of *sati* as vivid presentation constitute two inseparable aspects of the concept of mindfulness found in the *Pāli Nikāyas*.

Mindfulness performs first and foremost an ethical role, i.e., mindfulness vividly presents awareness, but in order to detect, prevent, and counteract unwholesome emotions and conceptualizations. I fail to see how this ethical role of mindfulness could be possible without remembering what is wholesome and without discrimination, i.e., comparing what is deemed wholesome to what is vividly presented to awareness in the present.

Saying that mindfulness performs primarily an ethical role, however, does not mean, as Bhikkhu Bodhi rightly suggests, that mindfulness as vivid presentation always involves remembering and discrimination. In other words, mindfulness as vivid presentation is not necessarily related to mindfulness as remembering, but whenever mindfulness performs an ethical role, both aspects of mindfulness,

i.e., vivid presentation and remembering, are involved.

Some people may object to Tse-Fu Kuan's account of mindfulness that relating *saññā* and mindfulness is inconsistent with the *Pāli Nikāyas*. For instance, the penultimate chapter of the *Sutta-Nipāta*, the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, suggests that the practice of mindfulness leads to the transcendence of all *saññā*. Thus, it would be inaccurate to interpret mindfulness as intrinsically related to *saññā*. Tse-Fu Kuan responds to this possible objection by saying that what mindfulness counteracts and eventually eliminates are unwholesome types of *saññā*, not all kinds of *saññā*. That is, what mindfulness tries to overcome are perceptions associated with unwholesome emotions and conceptualizations, not perceptions or conceptualizations in general.

Whereas Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about two primary functions of mindfulness (vividly present to awareness objects of experience, and guaranteeing that the factors of the path are correctly practiced) Tse-Fu Kuan speaks about four main functions of mindfulness: (1) simple awareness, (2) protective awareness, (3) introspective awareness, (4) deliberately forming conceptions.

Simple awareness overlaps with what Bhikkhu Bodhi describes as the primary function of mindfulness in the context of meditation: making the object present to awareness in a vivid way, i.e., vivid presentation. Simple awareness also overlaps with secular mindfulness. Like secular mindfulness, simple awareness limits itself to watch and consciously register the presence of objects. This conscious watching and registering consists in a non-judgmental observation and recognition, without evaluating the subject, the object, or the interaction between the two. As examples of simple awareness, Tse-Fu Kuan refers to mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, and mindfulness of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings.

At this preliminary stage of simple awareness, mindfulness does not seem to perform an ethical role, but this is not entirely true because simple awareness is not an end in itself, and therefore, strictly speaking, simple awareness is inseparable from subsequent

functions of mindfulness, which are intrinsically ethical in nature. Unless simple awareness is extricated from the ethical framework in which it finds its proper meaning and purpose, it does not make much sense to say that simple awareness has nothing to do with the ethical realm of the wholesome.

Protective awareness further watches the object and observes our reactions to sensory data in order to make sure that the mind does not fall into evil unwholesome states. Unlike simple awareness, protective awareness requires moral judgment and the proactive restraint (*saṃvara*) of the senses. Mindfulness as protective awareness presupposes the existence of simple awareness. That is, without simple awareness, protective awareness cannot take place.

Mindfulness as protective awareness can be compared to a gatekeeper that protects the mind from evil unwholesome states (SN 35:245). Like the gatekeeper, protective awareness guards or restrains the six sense-doors when one perceives any incoming sensory data.

Protective mindfulness can also be compared to tying to a firm post or pillar six animals pulling in the direction of their own domain (SN 35:247). The six animals are the six senses and the pulling in the direction of their own domain corresponds to the pulling in the direction of attractive experiences or in the opposite direction of repulsive experiences. Thus, protective mindfulness "functions as a post or pillar that restrains the six senses. It stops the senses from their habitual unwholesome reactions to their corresponding objects."[19]

Another important simile that illustrates the ethical function of protective awareness, appears in (SN 47:20). There a great crowd assembles to see the most beautiful girl of the land singing and dancing. A man is ordered to carry around a bowl of oil full to the brim between the crowd and the girl, followed by a man with a sword that will kill him if he spills even a little oil. The simile expresses the need to protect the mind, i.e., bowl of oil full to the brim, so that it

19 Ibid., 44.

does not fall into unwholesome states, i.e., spill oil.

The third function of mindfulness that Tse-Fu Kuan discusses is introspective awareness, which I prefer to call the counteractive function of mindfulness or counteractive awareness. Introspective or counteractive mindfulness takes place when protective awareness fails to do its job, and unwholesome emotions or conceptions enter the mind. Introspective awareness applies mindfulness as an antidote against unwholesome states. Unlike protective awareness, which is preventive in nature and operates before unwholesome states enter the mind, introspective/counteractive awareness functions after unwholesome states have entered. That is, introspective/counteractive awareness functions as a remedial measure when guarding or restraining the sense-doors has failed. In other words, whereas protective awareness prevents unwholesome states, introspective awareness counteracts them once they arise.

Tse-Fu Kuan describes the fourth function of mindfulness as deliberately forming conceptions. However, I find such terminology problematic and prefer to call this fourth function of mindfulness "contemplative remembering" of wholesome qualities. Mindfulness as contemplative remembering refers to discursive meditations that involve the repeated and close remembering (*anussati*) of wholesome qualities. This ethical function of mindfulness does not consist in forming concepts in general but rather in remembering, calling to mind and contemplating again and again specific concepts that embody or are associated with wholesome qualities.

There are lists of six and ten objects of mindfulness as contemplative remembering. The list of six includes contemplation of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, morality, generosity, and the virtuous qualities of the deities. The list of ten includes the aforementioned six plus contemplations of wholesome qualities associated to breath, death, body and peace, i.e., nirvana.

Another instance of mindfulness as contemplative remembering of wholesome qualities is the practice of loving-kindness or "*mettā*." The *mettāsutta* understands loving-kindness, not as a meditation that has nothing to do with mindfulness, but rather as a particular

way of practicing mindfulness that should be cultivated constantly: "whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, as long as someone is awake, he/she should practice this mindfulness" (*tiṭṭhañ caraṃ nisinno vā sayāno vā yāva tassa vigata middho etaṃ satiṃ adhiṭṭheyya*).

This view of loving-kindness as a way of practicing mindfulness to be cultivated while awake contradicts interpretations of mindfulness that restrict its meaning to the four establishments or foundations of mindfulness. This restrictive understanding of Buddhist mindfulness as consisting primarily in the practice of the four establishments or foundations seems inconsistent with the Buddha's teachings.

It seems that for the Buddha, one is supposed to cultivate mindfulness in a great variety of ways including loving-kindness meditation and other devotional contemplations, not just through the analytical meditations of the four *satipaṭṭhāna* or establishments of mindfulness. In other words, the four *satipaṭṭhāna* need not be understood as the only way to practice mindfulness, they can also be interpreted as necessary foundations to further cultivate mindfulness in a more comprehensive and holistic way. Whether these foundations of mindfulness are the only direct way to liberation from suffering and other forms of mindfulness are indirect or ineffective ways to attain nirvana is a controversial matter beyond the scope of this paper. I limit myself to claim that the Buddha of the *Pāli Nikāyas* did not view the four *satipaṭṭhāna* as the only way to practice mindfulness, which is uncontroversial.

Distortion or adaptation of the Buddha's teachings?

It is undeniable that secular approaches to mindfulness help many people to alleviate diverse forms of suffering.[20] Given that the

20. Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *The Mindful Way through Depression. Freeing Ourself from Chronic Unhappiness*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007). Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale, *Mindful-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2013). Mark Willimas and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness. An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, (New York: Rodale, 2011). Ronald Siegel, *the mindfulness solution. Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*, (New York: The

ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings is liberation from all forms of suffering, teaching mindfulness beyond Buddhists contexts and even for secular purposes is a good thing even if, from a Buddhist perspective, purposes such as improving the overall quality of education, public health, and individual wellbeing, still fall short of the ultimate Buddhist goal, i.e., complete eradication of suffering.

It is also unquestionable that many people who enter into the practice of meditation through the doors of secular mindfulness are not receptive to Buddhism and many aspects of the Buddha's teachings. Without a secularized and scientifically validated mindfulness, many non-Buddhists in western countries would not have found the spiritual resources necessary to cultivate wholesome mental states and peaceful responses to negative experiences. At least in this sense, secular approaches to mindfulness constitute a legitimate adaptation of the Dharma/Dhamma for non-Buddhists. As the founding father of the mindfulness movement explains, "mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was developed as one of a possibly infinite number of skillful means for bringing the dharma into mainstream settings."[21]

However, the question that concerns us here is slightly deeper than whether secular mindfulness is a useful skillful means to mitigate suffering or whether secular mindfulness helps non-Buddhists to practice the Buddha's teachings, even if they do so unknowingly and without ever taking refuge in the three Jewels. The question that we are asking here is about the long terms effects of secularized mindfulness for the Buddha's teachings understood in a broad sense, that is, including traditional aspects of Buddhism that many people would label religious: monastic institutions, devotional attitudes toward the three Jewels, performance of rituals, metaphysical beliefs about karma and rebirth.

Is the secularization of mindfulness going to contribute to the

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Guilford Press, 2010).

21. Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 281.

preservation of the Buddha's teachings in western countries or rather render many of its traditional aspects irrelevant? If the Buddha's teachings are preserved, then secular mindfulness can be considered an adaptation, but if traditional aspects of the Buddha's teachings become irrelevant or they get lost in translation, then many Buddhists may view secular mindfulness as a distortion of the Dharma/Dhamma that threatens the future of authentic Buddhism.

Whether secular approaches to mindfulness become adaptations or distortions of the Buddha's teachings will depend to a great extent on how traditional Buddhists respond. If traditional Buddhists from all countries and schools become familiar with both secular and Buddhist approaches to mindfulness meditation, and if they get involved in the efforts to teach mindfulness for secular purposes including the efforts to integrate mindfulness into education, then traditional aspects of the Buddha's teachings will be less likely to get lost in translation or become irrelevant for practitioners of secular mindfulness.

From a traditional Buddhist perspective, secular mindfulness is a useful yet simplified version of right mindfulness. Following Rupert Gethin, I think that the conception of mindfulness prevalent in scientific literature "does seem to centre on something of a minimalist definition of mindfulness. The traditional Buddhist account of mindfulness plays on aspects of remembering, recalling, reminding and presence of mind that can seem to be underplayed or even lost in the context of MBSR and MBCT."[22]

However, being a simplified version of mindfulness based on a minimalist definition of it does not have to be a bad thing. Quite the contrary, secular mindfulness has already proven to be a powerful tool to promote wholesome mental states consistent with Buddhist teachings and values. The fact that secular mindfulness promotes some Buddhist teachings and values beyond the traditional borders of Buddhism should not pose a problem for Buddhists. After all,

22. Rupert Gethin, "On Some Definitions of Mindfulness," in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 275.

the Buddha never taught that the limits of historical Buddhism correspond to the limits of the Dharma/Dhamma.

Rather than seen secular mindfulness as something necessarily counterproductive for the Buddha's teachings and traditional Buddhism, I prefer to see the applications of mindfulness beyond Buddhist contexts as a double edged sword. Following Bhikkhu Bodhi, I think that Buddhists "need to strike a balance between caution and appreciation."[23]

Buddhists should appreciate the positive role that secular mindfulness is having in the lives of many individuals. However, in order to preserve the Buddha's teachings and prevent the eventual distortion of the Dharma/Dhamma, Buddhists need to get involved and gain some control over the teaching of mindfulness meditation for secular purposes.

Ideally, the two approaches to mindfulness meditation should be distinguished but never separated. Neither conflating the two nor totally separating them will do. In other words, it would be a distortion of the Dharma/Dhamma to teach secular mindfulness as if it were equivalent or basically identical to right mindfulness, and as if it had nothing to do with ethical values characteristic of Buddhism. Please notice that I say values characteristic of Buddhism, not unique to Buddhism.

Whereas secular mindfulness tends to emphasize the non-judgmental and non-interfering observation of present experiences without specifying a set of values and an ethical purpose beyond such observation, Buddhist mindfulness does specify certain values and a clear ethical purpose beyond such observation. Observing the present moment in a lucid and vivid way is not an end in itself but rather a means to detect, prevent, and counteract unwholesome emotions and conceptualizations.

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23. Bikkhu Bodhi, "What does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective" in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 35.

Portraying secular mindfulness as value free or as beyond the realm of ethics seems to me highly misleading, more a marketing strategy than an actual reality. Like Buddhist mindfulness, secular mindfulness presupposes a value judgment and performs an ethical function. In so far as the non-judgmental observation of present experiences is intended to promote healthy mental responses and good mental habits, it can be said to serve an ethical purpose. Watching and registering objects in the present moment is never the ultimate goal, rather the goal is always to develop wholesome responses to our experiences and transform unwholesome mental states such as stress, anxiety, depression, etc., into wholesome mental states including calm, peace, patience, loving-kindness, compassionate understanding.

Secular mindfulness never assumes that all states of mind and all ways of responding to experiences are equally healthy or good for the individual and society. In fact, the non-judgmental stance of secular mindfulness implicitly presupposes an ethical evaluation and judgment, namely, that judgmental reactions are worse, i.e., less healthy and less conducive to the wellbeing of individuals, than non-judgmental responses. The non-judgmental stance of secular mindfulness is intrinsically ethical at least in the sense of assuming a value judgment about the good and wholesome nature of non-judgmental responses.

Secular approaches to mindfulness are compatible with what Tse-Fu Kuan calls "simple awareness" and what Bhikkhu Boddhi describes in terms of "lucid awareness" and "vivid presentation." Secular mindfulness overlaps with the initial or preliminary tasks of right mindfulness. Like initial right mindfulness, secular mindfulness consists primarily in establishing a lucid watchful presence that observes, notices, recognizes, and registers whatever happens in the present moment without reacting automatically and without ruminating about it.

A common expression for this initial stage of right mindfulness is "bare attention." For instance, the German monk Nyanaponika Thera describes bare attention in a way that resembles secular mindfulness:

> "Bare Attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of

> what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception. It is called "bare", because it attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind which, for Buddhist thought, constitutes the sixth sense. When attending to that sixfold sense impression, attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or by mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc), judgment or reflection. If during the time, short or long, given to the practice of Bare Attention, any such comments arise in one's mind, they themselves are made objects of Bare Attention, and are neither repudiated nor pursued, but are dismissed, after a brief mental note has been made of them"[24] …"Bare attention sees things without the narrowing and leveling effect of habitual judgments, it sees them ever anew, as if for the first time."[25]

Like secular mindfulness, bare attention is explained by Nyanaponika as a type of awareness that limits itself to noticing and mentally registering whatever we experience in the present moment without reacting, without judging, and without reflecting upon the contents of such experience.

Similarly, the American *Vipassanā* teacher Joseph Goldstein speaks about bare attention in a way that reminds us of secular mindfulness:

> "There is one quality of mind which is the basis and foundation of spiritual discovery, and that quality of mind is called "bare attention." Bare attention means observing things as they are, without choosing, without comparing, without evaluating, without laying our projections and expectations on to what is happening; cultivating instead a choiceless and non-interfering awareness."[26]

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24. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (London, England: Rider and Co, Ltd., 1962), 30.

25. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (London, England: Rider and Co, Ltd., 1962), 35.

26. Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Natural Unfolding*, (Santa

The similarity between bare attention and secular mindfulness can also be seen in the work of Bhikkhu Gunaratana. Specifically, in his best-selling *Mindfulness in Plain English*, perhaps the most influential Buddhist account of mindfulness in western countries, Gunaratana describes mindfulness as follows:

> "Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation…Whatever experience we may have, mindfulness just accept it… Mindfulness is an impartial watchfulness. It does not take side… Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for *sati* is "bare attention." It is not thinking. It does not get involved with thought or concepts. It does not get hung up on ideas or opinions or memories. It just looks. Mindfulness registers experiences, but it does not compare them. It does not label them or categorize them. It just observes everything as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory. It is, rather, the direct and immediate experiencing of whatever is happening, without the medium of thought. It comes before thought in the perceptual process. Mindfulness is present-moment awareness."[27]

Given Gunaratana's description of mindfulness, it is not surprising that Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the founding fathers of the secular approach to mindfulness, endorses Gunaratana's book by saying in its back-cover that it is "A masterpiece, I cannot recommend it highly enough."

However, although secular mindfulness seems to correspond to what some Buddhists of the Theravāda tradition call "bare attention," it would be a distortion of the Dhamma to reduce right mindfulness to bare attention and teach bare attention as if it were equivalent or virtually identical to the Buddhist approach to mindfulness.

Buddhists from all traditions should respond to any attempt to trivialize right mindfulness. Bhikkhu Bodhi has recently expressed

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Cruz, CA: Unity Press, 1976), 19.

27. Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 139-140.

his concerns about using of the expression "bare attention" to refer to initial stages of right mindfulness. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi:

> "the expression 'bare attention' seems faulty in two respects: first, because it conflates the two distinct mental factors of *sati* and *manasikāra*; and second, because no act of cognition is ever entirely devoid of factors imparting to it orientation and meaning."[28]

Bhikkhu Bodhi is especially critical of Bhikkhu Gunaratana's presentation of right mindfulness. For Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikku Gunaratana conflates the role of *manasikāra* or preconceptual apprehension of an object, which is automatic, spontaneous, and ethically indeterminate, with mindfulness, which requires a deliberate effort to be cultivated and which performs a key ethical function, i.e., eliminating the unwholesome and establishing the wholesome.[29]

Bhikkhu Bodhi also questions Bhikkhu Gunaratana for suggesting that mindfulness is essentially non-conceptual and non-discursive in nature. Bhikkhu Bodhi acknowledges that the initial task of mindfulness "is to 'keep to a bare registering of the facts observed' as free as possible from *distorting* conceptual elaborations"[30], but this does not mean that mindfulness is non-conceptual in all cases. No doubt, there are non-conceptual and non-discursive types of mindfulness practice, but there are also conceptual and discursive types of mindfulness including contemplations of the Buddha, death, and repulsiveness of the body.

Mindfulness may or may not involve conceptualization and discursive thought. However, even when mindfulness does not involve concepts and thought, mindfulness lays open the contents of the experiential field so that our perceptions can be further investigated

28. Bikkhu Bodhi, "What does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective" in *Mindfulness. Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins, and Applications*, eds. J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 32.

29. Ibid., 28.

30. Ibid., 32.

by clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) and wisdom (*paññā*), mental factors that often involve conceptualization and discursive thinking.

In sum, in order to prevent distortions of the Dharma/Dhamma and make sure that secular approaches to mindfulness do not trivialize the Buddha's teachings and render them irrelevant in the long term, secular mindfulness should be taught without conflating it with and without separating it from Buddhist right mindfulness. Just teaching secular mindfulness would distort both the Buddha's teachings and the very nature of mindfulness, which is deeper and broader than just observing and noticing things in a non-judgmental way. Similarly, just teaching Buddhist mindfulness and ignoring all the scientific literature on mindfulness would be a distortion of the Buddha's teachings, precisely for failing to adapt such teachings to new terminologies, new ways of thinking, new lands and new sensibilities.

I fully agree with Bhikkhu Bodhi when he states that Buddhists "can let anyone take from the Dhamma whatever they find useful even if it is for secular purposes."[31] However, I am not sure I can share Bhikkhu Bodhi's optimism when he suggests that Buddhists need not be "alarmed about the adaptation of Buddhist practices for secular ends."[32]

It is my sincere belief that Buddhists have reasons to be at least concerned about what many presentations of secular mindfulness do to the Buddha's teachings and the future of Buddhism in western countries. The fact is that many presentations of secular mindfulness today tend to ignore Buddhist right mindfulness or reduce it to bare attention. Unless Buddhists mobilize to take a more active role in the way mindfulness meditation is being taught by non-Buddhists, the Buddha's teachings run the risk of getting lost in translation and become utterly irrelevant for those practicing secular mindfulness.

What can Buddhists do in order to prevent the Buddha's teachings from getting lost in translation and becoming irrelevant? At the very

31. Ibid., 36.

32. Ibid., 35.

least, Buddhist from all countries and traditions should participate in the process of teaching mindfulness to non-Buddhists or for secular purposes. The goal is not to replace secular mindfulness by Buddhist right mindfulness but rather to prevent mindfulness from becoming trivialized and distorted beyond recognition.

Buddhists should take a more active role in the movement to integrate mindfulness into education as well as in scientific research on applications of mindfulness for secular purposes. Buddhists schools and universities should become a place to learn about both secular and Buddhist approaches to mindfulness.

Ideally, all Buddhists involved in teaching mindfulness meditation should be able to adopt a secular or a Buddhist approach depending on their circumstances and the background of their audiences. Only those with training in both Buddhist and secular mindfulness will be able to differentiate between the two and teach mindfulness in a way that neither clashes with non-Buddhist sensibilities nor trivializes the Buddha's teachings and renders them irrelevant in the long term.

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Abbreviations:

AN *Aṅgutara Nikāya*
DN - *Dīgha Nikāya*
MN - *Majjhima Nikāya*
SN - *Saṃyutta Nikāya*