

## The emphasis on the present moment in the cultivation of mindfulness

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### Abstract:

**Objectives:** The objective of this article is to explore the relationship between the present moment and mindfulness practice in early Buddhism.

**Methods:** Based on text-critical study, I begin with a brief look at the etymology of the term *satipaṭṭhāna* and then survey the mindfulness exercises found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and in at least one of its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels from the perspective of their relationship to the present moment. Exploring the same topic in relation to mindful eating leads me on to the memory dimension of mindfulness. In the final part of the article, I respond to criticism recently voiced by Rapgay (2019).

**Results and Conclusion:** The temporal reference of memory to the past needs to be seen as only one dimension, rather than an exhaustive account of mindfulness. The emphasis on the present-centeredness of mindfulness in contemporary MBIs has a precedent in early Buddhist thought, where a range of exercises described under the four establishments of mindfulness as well as the practice of mindful eating exhibit a similar concern with the present moment.

### Key words:

Early Buddhism; memory; mindfulness; overeating; present moment; *satipaṭṭhāna*.

### Introduction

Definitions of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn (1994) and Bishop et al. (2004) agree in emphasizing the need to be “in the present moment” or “present-centered”. In what follows I explore the degree to which such concern with the present moment was already a prominent feature of mindfulness practices in the early period of Buddhist thought and practice, corresponding to a time between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE (Anālayo 2012). For this purpose, I take up the detailed instructions on the cultivation of mindfulness given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10) and in at least one of its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels (MĀ 98 and EĀ 12.1), as well as instructions on mindful eating. Before doing so, however, I will briefly explore the significance of the term *satipaṭṭhāna* itself.

### The Etymology of *Satipaṭṭhāna*

According to the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 678), a principal manual of the Theravāda commentarial tradition, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is a combination of “mindfulness” (*sati*) with “foundation”

(*paṭṭhāna*). This seems an improbable derivation, as the word *paṭṭhāna* is not found in the early discourses and is only used in later texts. Moreover, with such a derivation one would expect the resultant term to become *satippaṭṭhāna* (with a double -p-). The Sanskrit equivalent *smṛtyupasthāna* points instead to a combination of mindfulness with “establishment”, *upasthāna* (Sanskrit) or *upaṭṭhāna* (Pāli). The corresponding verb “to establish”, *upaṭṭhahati*, is frequently employed in the discourses in relation to mindfulness. This differs from the verb *paṭṭhahati* (corresponding to the noun *paṭṭhāna* mentioned above), which never occurs with *sati*.

In sum, the compound *satipaṭṭhāna* can be understood as combining *sati* and *upaṭṭhāna*, with the first letter *u* being dropped by vowel elision. A way of translating the term *satipaṭṭhāna* that follows this etymology would then be as an “establishment of mindfulness”.

On adopting this derivation, as explained by Gethin (1992, p. 32),

*sati* is understood as a quality of mind that ‘stands near’ or ‘serves’ the mind; it watches over the mind. One might say that it is a form of ‘presence of mind.’

Adopting the same etymological explanation, Bodhi (2011, p. 25) reasoned:

[p. 572]

The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are the four *establishments* of mindfulness, a process of *setting up* mindfulness, distinguished as fourfold by way of its objective domains. This analysis indicates that to establish mindfulness is not to set about remembering something that occurred in the past, but to adopt a particular stance towards one’s present experience.

The etymology already points to the importance of “presence” as a central idea underlying *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. The next step now is to see how far this idea can be discerned in the exercises presented in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and at least one of its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels, which cover the following topics (presented in the sequence in which they are found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*):

The process of breathing,  
the bodily postures,  
bodily activities,  
the anatomical constitution of the body,  
the material elements of the body,  
the decay of the body after death,  
feelings,  
mental states,  
the five hindrances,  
the six senses,  
the seven factors of awakening.

In what follows I take up each of these eleven exercises, based on translating relevant instructions from each of the extant versions.

## Breathing

The cultivation of mindfulness of breathing is the first exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, found also in one of its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels. The instructions begin by directing mindfulness to the breath and then proceed through four distinct steps of practice:

Mindful one breathes in and mindful one breathes out.

Breathing in long, one knows: ‘I breathe in long’; breathing out long, one knows: ‘I breathe out long.’

Breathing in short, one knows: ‘I breathe in short’; breathing out short, one knows: ‘I breathe out short.’

One trains: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body’; one trains: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.’

One trains: ‘I shall breathe in calming bodily activity’; one trains: ‘I shall breathe out calming bodily activity.’

(MN 10: *so sato va assasati, sato passasati. dīghaṃ vā assasanto: dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto: dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti. rassaṃ vā assasanto: rassaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto: rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti. sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati. passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti sikkhati, passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī ti sikkhati*).

One is mindful of breathing in and knows one is breathing in mindfully; one is mindful of breathing out and knows one is breathing out mindfully.

Breathing in long, one knows one is breathing in long; breathing out long, one knows one is breathing out long.

Breathing in short, one knows one is breathing in short; breathing out short, one knows one is breathing out short.

One trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing in; one trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing out.

One trains in calming bodily activity when breathing in; one trains in calming bodily activity when breathing out.

(MĀ 98: 念入息, 即知念入息; 念出息, 即知念出息. 入息長, 即知入息長; 出息長, 即知出息長. 入息短, 即知入息短; 出息短, 即知出息短. 學一切身息入, [學]一切身息出. 學止身行息入, 學止[身]行息出; the square brackets mark text that has been emended: 覺到學 and □ to 身. Both instances are clearly textual errors in the original, as can be seen from the preceding phrases).

The instructions in both versions involve the following progression:

be mindful of the inhalations and exhalations,  
discern if the present inhalation or exhalation is long,  
discern if the present inhalation or exhalation is short,  
train to experience the whole body while inhaling or exhaling,  
train to calm bodily activity while inhaling or exhaling.

The meditative progression as a whole is clearly concerned with the present moment. The practice is not about remembering a breath from the past. One begins by just becoming mindful of the breath as it is occurring now. The next task is to discern whether this present breath is long or short. Such discerning is in a way slightly backward-looking, as only at the completion of a breath will one be sure whether this is indeed a long breath or rather a short one. At the same time, gauging the length of the breath requires continuous monitoring of its condition in the present moment with mindfulness and thus is indeed present-centered, in the sense that the main object of the mind is something that occurs in the here and now.

The next two steps are in turn slightly forward-looking. In fact, the Pāli verbs *assasissāmī* and *passasissāmī* convey the

[p. 573]

sense “I shall breathe in” and “I shall breathe out”. The implication appears to be that one inclines the mind in such a way that the whole body is experienced, and then in such a way that bodily activity is calmed. The experience of the whole body and the calming of bodily activity take place alongside awareness of inhalations and exhalations as they occur in the present moment.

In this way, the meditative progression described in these passages relates to the three time periods of past, present, and future. It does so in a way that allows each of them to be connected to the experience of the breath in the present moment. This neatly illustrates that, at least in early Buddhist thought, the emphasis on the present moment does not require a complete dissociation from past and future. Instead, being established in the present moment simply implies that one remains centered on what is occurring now. Remaining centered in the present like this can have considerable bandwidth and does not require a narrow focus. Understood in this way, remaining present-centered can comprise the immediate past (such that one is able to discern the length of the breath) or else the immediate future (such that one can incline the mind toward apperceiving a particular aspect of the meditative experience).

## Postures

The next exercise, found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and in one of its Chinese *Āgama* parallels, directs attention to the posture of one’s own body:

When walking, one knows: ‘I am walking’; or when standing, one knows: ‘I am standing’; or when sitting, one knows: ‘I am sitting’; or when lying down, one knows: ‘I am lying down’; or however one’s body is disposed, one knows it accordingly.

(MN 10: *gacchanto vā gacchāmī ti pajānāti, ṭhito vā ṭhito ’mhī ti pajānāti, nisinno vā nisinno ’mhī ti pajānāti, sayāno vā sayāno ’mhī ti pajānāti. yathā yathā vā pan’ assa kāyo paṇihito hoti, tathā tathā naṃ pajānāti*).

Walking, one knows one is walking; standing, one knows one is standing; sitting, one knows one is sitting; lying down, one knows one is lying down; [falling] asleep, one knows one is

[falling] asleep; waking up, one knows one is waking up; [falling] asleep [or] waking up, one knows one is [falling] asleep [or] waking up.

(MĀ 98: 行則知行, 住則知住, 坐則知坐, 臥則知臥, 眠則知眠, 寤則知寤, 眠寤則知眠寤).

These instructions are about one's present bodily posture; they are not concerned with a posture assumed a long time ago. It is "when walking" that one should know "I am walking"; the practice is not about retrospectively knowing, after having taken a walk previously, that at that time one had been walking.

Now in order to be able to know that one is walking, standing, etc., one needs to have learned the concepts of "walking" and "standing" at some point in the past. The same applies to the distinction between "long" and "short" breaths or to the notion of the "whole body" in the previous exercise. Without such knowledge, none of the above instructions could be carried out.

The same need, however, applies to a whole range of activities, which need not have a relationship to mindfulness. Brushing one's teeth with a distracted mind, thinking about this and that, is clearly a case of loss of mindfulness. Yet, it requires that at some point in one's youth one learned how to brush one's teeth. Doing something absentmindedly still involves whatever concepts or basic bodily skills one has learned earlier that enable carrying out that particular activity. This in turn implies that the ability to rely on previously-learned concepts does not depend on mindfulness being cultivated, although the presence of mindfulness may well strengthen such ability.

From the viewpoint of time, the cultivation of mindfulness, described in the above instructions, relies on the ability of the mind to make meaningful use of concepts like "walking" and "standing", etc., that have been learned earlier. Nevertheless, such cultivation is concerned with the occurrence of these postures (and the deployment of the relevant concepts) in the present moment.

## Activities

Whereas the previous practice was predominantly concerned with just being mindful of one's bodily posture, the next contemplation introduces an additional element of circumspection in regard to one's behavior. This finds its expression in the adjective "clearly knowing" or "rightly knowing" (*sampajāna*/正知), employed in a mode of contemplation found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and one of its two Chinese parallels:

When going forward and returning, one acts clearly knowing; when looking ahead and looking away, one acts clearly knowing; when flexing and extending [the limbs], one acts clearly knowing; when wearing the outer robe and [other] robes and [carrying] the bowl, one acts clearly knowing; when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting it, one acts clearly knowing; when defecating and urinating, one acts clearly knowing; when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent, one acts clearly knowing.

(MN 10: *abhikkante paṭikkante sampajānakārī hoti, ālokite vilokite sampajānakārī hoti, samiñjite pasārite*

[p. 574]

*sampajānakārī hoti, saṅghātipattacīvaradhāraṇe sampajānakārī hoti, asite pīte khāyite sāyite sampajānakārī hoti, uccārapassāvakamme sampajānakārī hoti, gate ṭhite nisinne sutte jāgarite bhāsīte tuṅhībhāve sampajānakārī hoti).*

One rightly knows going out and coming in, one contemplates and discerns it well; bending, stretching, lowering or raising [any limb], one does it with appropriate deportment; wearing the outer robe and [other] robes, and [carrying the] bowl, one does it properly; walking, standing, sitting, lying down, [falling] asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent: all this one rightly knows.

(MĀ 98: 正知出入, 善觀分別, 屈伸低昂, 儀容庠序, 善著僧伽梨及諸衣鉢, 行, 住, 坐, 臥, 眠, 寤, 語, 默, 皆正知之).

The element of circumspection instilled in this way can express itself in a dignified bearing. At the same time, it continues the present-centeredness of the previous practice, in that the concern is with activities that are being performed now. The quality of clearly or rightly knowing is concerned with one's present behavior.

In addition to the need to rely on previously learned concepts and bodily skills, discussed in relation to the previous exercise, one also needs to continue doing the above activities. An illustrative case is the carrying of the bowl, which would reflect the standard situation of Buddhist monastics as mendicants in the ancient Indian setting. Such carrying needs to be maintained continuously, as a dropping of the bowl could easily result in spilling the food already obtained and thereby a loss of the day's meal.

Yet, to continue doing a particular action applies to a whole range of activities, just as the knowing of particular concepts, discussed above. Both need not have a relationship to mindfulness, as they can also occur with absent-minded activities. In fact the Buddhist discourses illustrate a loss of mindfulness with the example of a monastic on the daily begging round (e.g. SN 20.10 and its parallel SĀ 1260). However, such loss of mindfulness does not involve a dropping of the begging bowl. Instead, it refers to a lack of sense restraint, as a result of which unwholesome conditions arise in the mind.

This does not imply that mindfulness does not offer considerable support to the continuity of doing a particular activity. The point is only that this cannot be its exclusive role, simply because such continuity can also take place in the absence of mindfulness.

## Anatomy

The input of previously received teachings becomes particularly evident with the next exercise, which brings in an element of intentional evaluation. This is evident already in the first part of the instruction, found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and both of its parallels:

One examines this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, enclosed by skin and full of many kinds of uncleanness.

(MN 10: *imameva kāyaṃ uddhaṃ pādatalā adho kesamatthakā tacapariyantam pūram nānappakārassa asucino paccavekkhati*).

One contemplates this body, according to its position and according to what is attractive and what is repulsive, from head to foot, seeing that it is full of various kinds of uncleanness.

(MĀ 98: 此身隨住隨其好惡, 從頭至足, 觀見種種不淨充滿).

One contemplates this body according to its nature and functions, from head to feet and from feet to head, contemplating all in this body that is unclean and not worth being coveted.

(EĀ 12.1: 觀此身隨其性行, 從頭至足, 從足至頭, 觀此身中皆悉不淨, 無有可貪).

The three versions continue by listing different anatomical parts, such as hair, skin, various organs, bodily liquids, etc. The exercise receives further illustration in a simile found in two of the three versions (MN 10 and MĀ 98), which describes looking into a container or bag with various grains and recognizing that there is rice, beans, etc. This image seems to convey that the purpose of the practice is not to generate disgust towards the body, but rather to lead to an attitude free of attachment, similar to the attitude one would have when looking at various grains.

Now in order to carry out the above practice, one needs to have previously received corresponding instructions. This holds similarly for the preceding exercises. In the case of mindfulness of breathing, for example, progressing through the different steps delineated in the instructions requires that these have been learned at an earlier time and kept in mind.

This goes to show that a concern with being mindful in the present moment goes hand in hand with the ability to keep in mind the import of relevant instructions. In other words, to speak of mindfulness as being present-centered does not imply a concept-free state of mind that is completely dissociated from any type of memory. It only conveys that the main thrust of the cultivation of mindfulness requires being aware of what happens in the here and now.

Moreover, the introduction of an element of deliberate evaluation, here in terms of being “unclean” or even “impure” (*asuci*/不淨), is unmistakably a dimension of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in early Buddhism. At the same time, the concern remains

[p. 575]

the body at present. It is “this body”, “this same body”, right here and now, that should be viewed in such a way as to diminish attachment.

**Elements**

An interest in the constitution of the body continues with the next modality of practice, also found in all three versions. This exercise takes up the material elements that make up the body:

One examines this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of the elements: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the wind element.’

(MN 10: *imameva kāyaṃ yathāṭṭhitam yathāpaṇihitam dhātuso paccavekkhati: atthi imasmiṃ kāye pathavīdhātu āpodhātu tejodhātu vāyodhātū ti*).

One contemplates the body’s elements: ‘Within this body of mine there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element, the space element, and the consciousness element.’

(MĀ 98: 觀身諸界: 我此身中有地界, 水界, 火界, 風界, 空界, 識界).

One contemplates [reflecting]: ‘In this body, are there the earth element, the water [element], the fire [element], and the wind element?’

(EĀ 12.1: 觀此身有地種耶, 水, 火, 風種耶).

The four elements common to the three versions reflect basic experiential qualities of matter in terms of solidity (= earth), cohesion (= water), temperature (= fire), and motion (= wind). The additional reference to space and consciousness in the second of the three translated passages is probably a textual expansion, influenced by listings of the six elements in different contexts.

The three versions agree in illustrating this practice with the example of a butcher who kills a cow and then sells its parts. At the time of sale, the butcher no longer thinks of what is being sold as a “cow”. Instead, what is on sale are different “pieces of meat”. In the same way, meditators learn to see their own bodies as a combination of these different elements.

The simile confirms that the concern is with the present body’s condition as made up of elements. It is the butchered cow’s present state as an assembly of pieces of meat, rather than the living cow before it was butchered, that illustrates the proper carrying out of this exercise of viewing one’s present body as an assembly of elements.

## Corpse

The next form of practice, found in all three versions, has a dead human body as the main topic. The instructions proceed through different stages of decay of a corpse, relating each of these to the mortality of one’s own body and its eventual disintegration:

As though one were to see a corpse thrown away in a charnel ground ... one compares this same body with it: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

(MN 10: *seyyathā pi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitam ... so imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ayam pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī etaṃ anatīto ti*).

One contemplates another's corpse ... having seen it, one compares oneself to it: 'This body of mine now is also like this, it is of the same nature, and in the end cannot escape [this fate].'  
(MĀ 98: 觀彼死屍 ... 見已自比: 今我此身亦復如是, 俱有此法, 終不得離).

One contemplates a corpse ... one contemplates that one's own body is not different from that: 'My body will not escape from this calamity.'  
(EĀ 12.1: 觀死屍 ... 自觀身與彼無異: 吾身不免此患)

The instructions in the two Chinese versions seems to refer to actually seeing a corpse. This in turn implies that the actual exercise is either done standing in front of a corpse or else a form of recollection of a corpse seen in the past. The object employed for such recollection would no longer be present-centered, as it involves something seen previously. At the same time, the contemplation requires that this sight is then applied to one's own present body, as explicitly indicated in the second version (MĀ 98) with the qualification "now" (今).

The Pāli version employs the expression "as though one were to see" (*seyyathā pi passeyya*). This conveys the impression that an act of imagination could also fulfil the purposes of the instruction.

Comparable to the three time periods evident in the instructions on mindfulness of breathing, the present exercise also brings in the future. Based on seeing or having formerly seen a corpse (or at least imagining it), one realizes that one's present body will in future "be like that, it is not exempt from that fate", it "in the end cannot escape" death and decay, and one realizes that "my body will not escape from this calamity."

Here the time frame is broader than in the case of mindfulness of breathing, where past and future time periods did not exceed a single breath. Seeing a corpse could in principle have

[p. 576]

happened many months or even years earlier, and such a vision from the distant past would then be applied to the present body. Such contemplation in turn might be undertaken months or even years before the time when the practitioner's body actually undergoes death and decay. In this way, the present exercise clearly shows that *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation can involve past and future, even though, here too, the mortality of the *present* body is the chief concern.

This is the last of the exercises assembled under the heading of "contemplation of the body" in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and at least one of its Chinese *Āgama* parallels, corresponding to the first of the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*).

## Feeling

In its Buddhist usage, the term “feeling” does not refer to emotions, but rather to the affective tone of experience as either pleasant, painful, or neutral. This affective or hedonic tone is the topic of the second establishment of mindfulness, taken up in all three versions:

When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows: ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling a painful feeling, one knows: ‘I feel a painful feeling’; when feeling a neutral feeling, one knows: ‘I feel a neutral feeling.’

(MN 10: *sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno: sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti; dukkhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno: dukkhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti; adukkhamasukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamāno: adukkhamasukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyāmi ti pajānāti*).

At the time of feeling a pleasant feeling, one then knows one is feeling a pleasant feeling; at the time of feeling a painful feeling, one then knows one is feeling a painful feeling; at the time of feeling a neutral feeling, one then knows one is feeling a neutral feeling.

(MĀ 98: 覺樂覺時, 便知覺樂覺; 覺苦覺時, 便知覺苦覺; 覺不苦不樂覺時, 便知覺不苦不樂覺).

At the time of having a pleasant feeling, one knows of oneself: ‘I am getting a pleasant feeling’; at the time of having a painful feeling, one knows of oneself: ‘I am getting a painful feeling’; at the time of having a neutral feeling, one knows of oneself: ‘I am getting a neutral feeling.’

(EĀ 12.1: 得樂痛時, 即自覺知: 我得樂痛; 得苦痛時, 即自覺知: 我得苦痛; 得不苦不樂痛時, 即自覺知: 我得不苦不樂痛).

The instructions continue by combining these three basic feeling tones with additional categories.

An emphasis on the present moment is a prominent feature of this second establishment of mindfulness. There can be hardly any doubt that the meditation object is the type of feeling tone that is manifesting right now. It is “when feeling” a particular feeling that one should recognize it, becoming aware of it “at the time of feeling” it or else “at the time of having” it.

## Mind

The third establishment of mindfulness covers various states of mind. The first in a range of mental states, listed for contemplation in all three versions, takes up the presence or absence of lust or sensual desire:

One knows a mind with lust to be ‘a mind with lust’; or one knows a mind without lust to be ‘a mind without lust’.

(MN 10: *sarāgaṃ vā cittaṃ: sarāgaṃ cittaṃ ti pajānāti, vītarāgaṃ vā cittaṃ: vītarāgaṃ cittaṃ ti pajānāti*).

Having a mind with sensual desire, one knows, as it really is, that one has a mind with sensual desire; having a mind without sensual desire, one knows, as it really is, that one has a mind without sensual desire.

(MĀ 98: 有欲心, 知有欲心如真; 無欲心, 知無欲心如真).

Having a mind with sensual craving, one then knows of oneself that one has a mind with sensual craving; having a mind without sensual craving, one also knows of oneself that one has a mind without sensual craving.

(EĀ 12.1: 有愛欲心, 便自覺知有愛欲心; 無愛欲心, 亦自覺知無愛欲心).

As in the case of contemplation of feeling, here, too, the thrust of the practice is on recognizing what is happening right now. On “having a mind” that is either with or else without lust, sensual desire, or sensual craving, one should recognize its present condition “as it really is”. In this way, the second and third establishments of mindfulness are indubitably invested with a strong emphasis on the present moment, requiring respectively the recognition of the feeling tone and the mental condition that manifest here and now.

## Hindrances

An exercise found under the heading of the fourth establishment of mindfulness in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and one of its Chinese *Āgama* parallels takes up five detrimental mental states. These fall under the category of being “hindrances”, in the sense that they *hinder* the proper functioning of the mind. The first of these five is basically the same as the mental

### [p. 577]

state taken up above in relation to the third establishment of mindfulness, as it concerns sensual desire:

If sensual desire is present within, one knows: ‘sensual desire is present within me’; if sensual desire is not present within, one knows: ‘sensual desire is not present within me’; and one knows how unarisen sensual desire arises, one knows how arisen sensual desire is removed, and one knows how removed sensual desire does not arise in the future.

(MN 10: *santaṃ vā ajjhattaṃ kāmacchandaṃ: atthi me ajjhattaṃ kāmacchando ti pajānāti, asantaṃ vā ajjhattaṃ kāmacchandaṃ: natthi me ajjhattaṃ kāmacchando ti pajānāti; yathā ca anuppannassa kāmacchandassa uppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa kāmacchandassa pahānaṃ hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca pahīnassa kāmacchandassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti*).

Actually having sensual desire within, one knows, as it really is, that one has sensual desire; actually having no sensual desire within, one knows, as it really is, that one has no sensual desire. One knows, as it really is, how unarisen sensual desire arises; and one knows, as it really is, how already arisen sensual desire ceases and does not arise again.

(MĀ 98: 內實有欲, 知有欲如真; 內實無欲, 知無欲如真. 若未生欲而生者, 知如真; 若已生欲滅不復生者, 知如真).

As was the case with contemplation of mental states, here, too, the present condition of the mind is the issue. “If sensual desire is present within” or else when “actually having sensual desire internally”, one should clearly recognize this. Based on that recognition, contemplation proceeds to examining the conditions for the arising of the hindrances. Such examining of conditionality is what marks the difference between the present contemplation and the third establishment of mindfulness. It involves the three periods of time again, as one needs to understand how a particular hindrance has arisen (past), how one can overcome it (present), and how one can prevent it from arising again (future).

## Sense-spheres

Another exercise found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and in one of its Chinese *Āgama* parallels concerns contemplation of the fettering force of experience at any of the senses:

One knows the eye, one knows forms, and one knows the fetter that arises dependent on both; and one knows how an unarisen fetter arises, one knows how an arisen fetter is removed, and one knows how a removed fetter does not arise in the future.

(MN 10: *cakkhuñ ca pajānāti, rūpe ca pajānāti, yañ ca tadubhayam paṭicca uppajjati saṃyojanaṃ tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca anuppannassa saṃyojanassa uppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa saṃyojanassa pahānaṃ hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca pahīnassa saṃyojanassa āyatim anuppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti*).

Actually having a fetter within, one knows, as it really is, that one has a fetter within; actually not having a fetter within, one knows, as it really is, that one does not have a fetter within; one knows, as it really is, how an unarisen fetter arises within; and one knows, as it really is, how an already arisen fetter ceases within and does not arise again.

(MĀ 98: 內實有結, 知內有結如真; 內實無結, 知內無結如真. 若未生內結而生者, 知如真; 若已生內結滅不復生者, 知如真).

The two versions agree in applying this instruction to each of the five sense doors of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and the body, as well as to the mind, which in the early Buddhist analysis is reckoned a sixth sense.

When examined from a temporal perspective, the pattern is the same as in the earlier case of the hindrances: knowing how a particular mental condition has arisen (past), how it can now be overcome (present), and how its re-arising can be prevented (future). This takes place based on the clear recognition, in the present moment, of the absence or presence of the hindrance in question.

## Awakening Factors

The last contemplation to be taken up, found in all three versions, concerns the awakening factors:

If the mindfulness awakening factor is present within, one knows: ‘the mindfulness awakening factor is present within me’; if the mindfulness awakening factor is not present within, one knows: ‘the mindfulness awakening factor is not present within me’; and one knows how the unarisen mindfulness awakening factor arises, and one knows how the arisen mindfulness awakening factor is perfected by development.

(MN 10: *santaṃ vā ajjhataṃ satisambojjhaṅgaṃ: atthi me ajjhataṃ satisambojjhaṅgo ti pajānāti, asantaṃ vā ajjhataṃ satisambojjhaṅgaṃ: natthi me ajjhataṃ satisambojjhaṅgo ti pajānāti, yathā ca anuppannassa satisambojjhaṅgassa uppādo hoti tañ ca pajānāti, yathā ca uppannassa satisambojjhaṅgassa bhāvanāya pāripūrī hoti tañ ca pajānāti*).

[p. 578]

Actually having the mindfulness awakening factor within, one knows, as it really is, that one has the mindfulness awakening factor; actually not having the mindfulness awakening factor within, one knows, as it really is, that one does not have the mindfulness awakening factor; one knows, as it really is, how the unarisen mindfulness awakening factor arises; and one knows, as it really is, how the arisen mindfulness awakening factor is then maintained without loss or deterioration, and is further developed and increased.

(MĀ 98: 內實有念覺支, 知有念覺支如真; 內實無念覺支, 知無念覺支如真; 若未生念覺支而生者, 知如真; 若已生念覺支便住不忘而不衰, 退轉修增廣者, 知如真).

One cultivates the mindfulness awakening factor supported by insight, supported by dispassion, and supported by cessation, discarding bad states.

(EĀ 12.1: 修念覺意, 依觀, 依無欲, 依滅盡, 捨諸惡法).

The three versions apply their respective presentation to the remaining six awakening factors of investigation of states, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity (or equipoise).

As far as the actual instructions are concerned, the last version (EĀ 12.1) differs substantially from the other two (MN 10 and MĀ 98). These present a contemplation of the awakening factors in ways that are basically similar to that of the hindrances and the fetters (except for the difference that the awakening factors are to be cultivated rather than overcome). This involves the same time periods as mentioned earlier, based on recognition of the absence or presence of an awakening factor in the present moment.

The third version instead relates each awakening factor to insight-related themes. Such application requires the presence of the awakening factors at that very moment in time, and therefore it something also related to the present moment.

The different exercises surveyed above reflect a pervasive emphasis on the present moment. At the same time, the practice can also involve the past and the future, and at times can even include a mode of recollection (of a corpse seen earlier). In addition, all of the modalities of mindfulness

described rely on the ability to employ concepts learned earlier and implement instructions received previously.

The relationship evident from the above survey of the relationship between mindfulness practice and the present moment helps to supplement a comment by Sharf (2015, p. 470), in that “the cultivation of present-centered awareness is not without precedent in Buddhist history; similar innovations arose in medieval Chinese Zen (Chan) and Tibetan Dzogchen.” The instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* show that, as far as precedents for the idea of mindfulness as present-centered are concerned, these can already be found in early Buddhist discourse.

## **Eating**

The exercises described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* have as their explicit aim to lead the practitioner to liberation. A concern with the present moment, evident in these exercises, can also be seen with the employment of mindfulness for the purpose of countering overeating. Elsewhere I have explored this topic in more detail (Anālayo 2018b); for the present context it will suffice to note that three discourse versions report the Buddha giving instructions on mindfulness to an overeating king by the name of Pasenadi. As a result of implementing the instructions, the king becomes slim. The first part of the relevant verse instruction proceeds as follows:

People, who are constantly mindful, know their measure with the food they have gotten.  
(SN 3.13: *manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane*).

People should collect themselves with mindfulness, knowing their measure with any food.  
(SĀ 1150: 人當自繫念, 每食知節量).

People should constantly recollect by themselves with mindfulness that on getting food and drink they should know their measure.  
(SĀ<sup>2</sup> 73: 夫人常當自憶念, 若得飲食應知量).

Such mindfulness is concerned with the food the king eats right then. He will not be able to know when the proper measure of food has been eaten unless he remains mindful of his eating in the present moment.

This case is of additional interest insofar as the king asked another person to memorize the instruction and then recite it every time the meal was brought for him. Evidently King Pasenadi did not trust his own memory abilities (needless to say, in the ancient Indian oral setting the alternative of writing the instruction down would not have been an option). He required help in order to keep even a relatively short verse in mind and ensure that he would remember it when the time had come to put its instruction into action. In this particular case, the reminding of the instructions, given on an earlier occasion by the Buddha, is being taken care of by someone else. Nevertheless, the king’s mindful practice itself is clearly successful, as he does lose weight.

## **Mindfulness and Memory**

A relationship between mindfulness and recalling events from the distant past can be seen in a simile that describes a frontier town, found in a Pāli discourse and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel (AN 7.63 and MĀ 3).

[p. 579]

Notably, this appears to be the only instance where the Pāli discourses and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels agree in describing mindfulness as involving memory of the distant past; in other occurrences of this type of description, the parallels tend to differ.

The simile itself depicts a frontier town equipped in various ways that make it safe. Its purpose is to illustrate qualities commendable for a Buddhist disciple. Two assets of the secure frontier town are its varied weaponry and its wise gatekeeper. The gatekeeper stands for mindfulness:

A noble disciple is mindful, endowed with supreme skill in mindfulness, being one who remembers and recollects what has been done long ago and what has been said long ago. (AN 7.63: *ariyasāvako satimā hoti paramena satinepakkena samannāgato, cirakatam pi cirabhāsitam pi saritā anussaritā*).

A noble disciple constantly practices mindfulness, is accomplished in right mindfulness, always recollecting without remiss what has been practiced long ago and what has been heard long ago. (MĀ 3: 聖弟子常行於念, 成就正念, 久所曾習, 久所曾聞, 恒憶不忘).

The weaponry as another factor that ensures the safety of the border town represents the noble disciple's learning, in the sense of being well acquainted with the teachings by the Buddha (and other eminent disciples), which in the oral setting of ancient India required memorization. It is noteworthy that mindfulness and remembering the teachings are listed separately and compared to different aspects of the frontier town. Needless to say, they interact and support each other. Yet, they are sufficiently distinct to be associated with diverse aspects of the frontier town, namely the gatekeeper and the weaponry.

The term used to designate the weaponry of learnedness in the simile is having “heard much” (*bahussuta*/多聞). Since teachings and instructions were given and received in an oral manner, being learned required that one had heard much and then memorized what one had heard. Learnedness in terms of having “heard” teachings is also reflected in the standard introduction to the early discourses, which takes the form “thus have I heard” (*evaṃ me sutam*/我聞如是; see also Anālayo 2014).

The simile of the frontier town then expresses the ability to keep such teachings in memory with the verb “to retain” (*dhāreti*/持). This is the typical terminology used for recalling teachings or instructions, as can also be seen, for example, in a discourse which reports a celestial being checking whether a monastic has memorized a particular teaching by the Buddha on remaining in the present moment (MN 134, MĀ 166, and T 77). Both the formulations of the question to the monastic and his reply employ the verb “to retain” (*dhāreti*/受持/持).

Another example occurs in the context of methods to counter sleepiness during meditation (AN 7.58, MĀ 83, and T 47). The relevant antidotes are to reflect on or else recite teachings as one has earlier heard them (*yathāsutam*/隨本所聞/如所聞法) and as one has learnt them by heart (*yathāpariyattam*/隨而受持/如所誦法).

This terminology conveys the impression that the role of mindfulness as a gatekeeper does not seem to involve just memory of the teachings. The description of the gatekeeper does not employ the verb “to retain” or even “to learn by heart”. Instead, it speaks of the ability “to remember” (*sarati*, 憶), a verb that conveys the sense of recalling in general and is not confined to memory of teachings or instructions.

In the Pāli passage on the gatekeeper of mindfulness, such remembering concerns two type of former activities, one of which is what has been “said” (*bhāsita*); only the Chinese parallel refers to what one has “heard” (聞). As far as the Pāli version is concerned, the formulation leaves little room for assuming that the description of the gatekeeper of mindfulness is concerned with remembering teachings heard earlier. Instead, it seems to be simply about recalling what was earlier said, including by oneself.

The other activity to be remembered is what has been “done” (*kata*). This can hardly intend teachings one has received previously. The terminology in the Chinese parallel again leaves room for different interpretations, as the idea of having “practiced” (習) could also be related to the teachings. The Pāli terminology, however, has no evident relationship to teachings or instructions.

Thus the basic idea conveyed by the gatekeeper of mindfulness, in particular in the Pāli version, appears to be simply an improvement of memory capacity in general. The point is obvious: the less absent-minded one is when doing or saying something, the higher the chances that one later remembers it. Understood in this way, it indeed makes sense to refer to the quality of mindfulness by indicating an outcome to be expected from its cultivation, namely improving the ability to remember what one did and said even long ago.

This does not imply, however, that because of this indication all modalities of mindfulness must now somehow be related to a recall of the distant past, let alone requiring invariably a remembering of relevant teachings learnt previously. The case of King Pasenadi clearly shows that such a conclusion will not work. In his case, recall of the teaching given originally by the Buddha on an earlier occasion was done on behalf of Pasenadi by an attendant, so that the king’s practice of mindfulness just required keeping in mind the instruction, which had just been repeated in his presence, and then monitoring his own eating behavior accordingly.

The survey in the first part of this article has shown that the cultivation of *satipaṭṭhāna* comes with a

[p. 580]

pervasive emphasis on the present moment. Take the example of mindfulness of breathing, mentioned at the outset of this article. Here the task is indubitably to be aware of the breath as it manifests in the present moment. It does not require the type of learnedness described in the simile of the frontier town. The employment of mindfulness of breathing in various Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) is a case in point, as participants often do not even know about the historical background of this practice, leaving little room for them to remember Buddhist teachings when being mindful of the breath.

However, in reply to Anālayo (2018a), Rapgay (2019) proposed that “a practitioner can recall a particularly way of breathing learned many months ago, and then use the information to manipulate, update, and adjust the ongoing way of breathing.” Yet, such an approach to the practice is not reflected in the canonical instructions, which are concerned with the present breath.

In contrast to other ancient Indian practices like breath retention, which the Buddha is on record for having undertaken during his quest for awakening and then discarded as not leading to liberation (Anālayo 2017b), mindfulness of breathing in early Buddhist discourse is not about “manipulating” or “updating” the present breath, on the basis of a particular way of breathing learned in the past.

Another criticism of Anālayo (2018a) by Rapgay (2019) took the following form:

He rationalizes that if sati is remembering/memory then remembering/memory must be intentionally brought to the forefront of and maintained continually in consciousness. However, according to him, memory is already present with all mental states, and therefore, there is no need to intentionally bring memory to the forefront of consciousness ... his contention that remembering/memory cannot be intentionally brought to the forefront of consciousness because it is already present with all mental activities is problematic.

The point made in (Anālayo 2018a), the paper to which Rapgay replied, was not at all about whether it is in principle possible to bring memory to the forefront of consciousness. Instead, the issue was simply that the instruction to breathe in and out mindfully is concerned with the breath in the present moment and not with memories of a breath experienced a long time ago. The topic of memory being required for any meaningful activity, made in a different context, was just to clarify that the early Buddhist conception of *sati/smṛti* involves a quality that is not present in every state of mind and therefore cannot be treated as an equivalent to memory. A better candidate for that would be perception (*saññā*/想).

Rapgay (2019) also saw “contrary positions—the canons stating that remembering/memory is a part of sati/mindfulness from Ven. Anālayo’s that sati has nothing to do with remembering/memory”, as “he vociferously argues against any role for remembering/memory and in particular long-term memory in sati/mindfulness.”

The position that *sati* has nothing to do with memory is not found at all in the publications on this topic by Anālayo (2003, 2013, 2017a). Such an assertion could in fact easily be refuted by reference to one of the three higher knowledges realized, according to the canonical sources, by

the Buddha in the night of his awakening: recollection of past lives (Anālayo 2018c). This type of recollection involves remembering various circumstances of a former life, such as one's former name and family, length of life, etc. The ability to recollect one's past lives is explicitly reckoned a modality of mindfulness:

[Recollection of] one's former lives is to be realized through mindfulness.  
(DN 33: *pubbenivāso satiyā sacchikaraṇīyo*).

[Through] mindfulness one realizes [recollection of] one's former lives.  
(DĀ 9: 念宿命證).

This passage makes it impossible to take the position that mindfulness has nothing to do with memory. Instead of taking such a position, however, the discussion in (Anālayo 2018a) was about the need to avoid making the memory nuance, particularly if this is understood in the sense of remembering the distant past, as the default approach for understanding mindfulness in all its different modalities and functions.

In fact (Anālayo 2018a) showed that the definition of mindfulness as a faculty (*indriya*/根) in the Chinese *Āgama* parallels refers to the four establishments of mindfulness, instead of mentioning the ability to remember what was done or said long ago. The definition by way of the four establishments of mindfulness is the common ground for the early Buddhist perspective on the matter. It follows that early Buddhist mindfulness, in its various modalities, cannot be restricted to remembering something that has happened a long time ago (Anālayo 2018d).

This early Buddhist position is furthermore in line with what other scholars have suggested for later Buddhist tradition. As part of an exploration of mindfulness in classical Yogācāra, for example, Griffith (1992/1993, p. 111) reasoned that mindfulness

has by itself nothing essentially to do with the remembering of some past object of cognition; it can operate just as well in the present as in the past, and it is perhaps

[p. 581]

more natural to take its primary sense as having a present reference. The fact that *smṛti* notes ... objects, however, makes possible their preservation as objects of consciousness ... and thus explains the extension of the term to cover at least some of the same semantic ground as the English word *memory* and its cognates. In other words, I suggest that the basic meaning of *smṛti* and derivatives in Buddhist technical discourse — basic in the sense that this meaning is both temporally and logically prior to other meanings — has to do with observation and attention, not with awareness of past objects.

In the context of a survey of relevant material from the tradition of the Great Perfection, Kapstein (1992/1993: 249) concluded that

it appears not at all strange that memory and mindfulness have often been gathered together under a single lexical head ... although the normal temporal reference of memory to the past is sometimes not a feature of the codesignated phenomena in question.

In sum, the temporal reference of memory to the past needs to be seen as only one dimension, rather than an exhaustive account of mindfulness. The emphasis on the present-centeredness of mindfulness in contemporary MBIs has a precedent in early Buddhist thought, where a range of exercises described under the four establishments of mindfulness as well as the practice of mindful eating exhibit a similar concern with the present moment.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

### **Abbreviations**

AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); DN, *Dīgha-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SĀ<sup>2</sup>, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100); SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition, Vism, *Visuddhimagga*.

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