

Remembering with Wisdom is not Intrinsic to All Forms of Mindfulness

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Current Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have at times been criticized for not incorporating more explicitly traditional associations of mindfulness with wisdom and memory. In the present brief reply to Levman (2018b), published in the same issue of this journal, I argue that such criticism is not really pertinent, as it reflects only a specific understanding of mindfulness held within a particular Buddhist tradition. It does not apply to the whole variety of mindfulness-constructs extant since ancient times in the Buddhist traditions and hence cannot be employed as the only relevant measuring rod by which any definition in current usage must be evaluated.

Problematizing MBIs

The understanding of mindfulness in traditional Theravāda Abhidharma and exegesis stands in a close relationship to wisdom and memory. Based on affirming the importance of these associations, Levman (2018b) argued:

This has implications not just for Buddhist practitioners, but also for the modern mindfulness movement, for mindfulness divorced from memory and wisdom is mindfulness divorced from the teachings, and will accordingly have only limited benefit.

It is indeed the case that the cultivation of mindfulness by Theravāda Buddhist practitioners, as long as they operate within the framework of traditional Theravāda teachings, should be aligned with the particular understanding of this mental quality as described in later Pāli literature. However, the same does not hold for employing forms of mindfulness that do not operate within this framework. Theravāda definitions of mindfulness only apply to those involved in Theravāda forms of practice. They do not apply to other Buddhist traditions, which differ, at times substantially, from the Theravāda understanding of mindfulness. This is the case for meditation practices that follow the teachings of early Buddhism, a term I use to refer to roughly the first two centuries in the development of Buddhism, as well as for Himalayan and East Asian forms of Buddhist meditation, which can involve “non-dual” modes of mindfulness (Dunne 2011).

Mindfulness and Its Antecedents

In support of problematizing understandings of mindfulness that do not involve a form of remembering with wisdom, Levman (2018b) asserted that

the word *sati*, usually translated as “mindfulness” in English, is constrained in meaning by its etymological heritage, that is, the Vedic word *smṛti* meaning “memory” or “remembrance.” There is only one definition of *sati* in the canon attributable to the Buddha, and there it is defined in terms of memory with wisdom (*sati-nepakkena*).

The etymological heritage has been discussed in detail by Klaus (1993), who concluded (p. 86):

the Indian people in Vedic and early Buddhist times made no distinction between becoming conscious of things of the past and those of the present, as far as the psychological process is concerned.

[p. 1988]

This important clarification reflects the difficulties of applying a particular Western concept to a different cultural and historical setting. It shows that the etymological heritage does not constrain *sati* to “memory”, which according to a definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary (1971, p. 331) stands for

the faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity of retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past.

The problem here is that in English usage words like “memory” and “remembrance” tend to have prominent connotations of events in the “past”. Such is not invariably the case for *sati* and its ancient Indian antecedents. In fact, in an earlier paper Levman (2018a, p. 1045) quoted Klaus to the effect that

the basic meaning of *smṛ* in Vedic literature as well as in early Buddhist literature is “to become conscious of (something past or present by either outer or inner stimuli, either intentionally or unintentionally).”

The relevant point in the above quote is the reference to something past *or present*. In the same vein, Gethin (1992, p. 36) pointed out that

the Sanskrit root *smṛ* seems to connote two basic ideas, namely “to remember” and more simply, perhaps, “to have in mind.” Both of these uses seem to be witnessed from the *Ṛgveda* onwards.

Once this much has already been clarified in previous scholarship, there is little scope left to argue for *sati* in the Buddhist traditions being invariably “constrained” to memory or remembrance, with an implicit relationship to things of the past.

Definitions of Mindfulness

The other assumption by Levman that “there is only one definition of *sati* in the canon attributable to the Buddha” also does not accurately reflect the actual situation. In his earlier paper, Levman (2018a, 1043) had already mentioned one definition of mindfulness (SN 48.10)

that combines a reference to recalling what happened a long time ago with the four establishments of mindfulness (Pāli *satipaṭṭhāna*, Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna*, Chinese 念處, Tibetan *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa*). His assertion that “this quote is repeated 13 times in the suttas in various places” is not quite correct, as the complete quote he gives is found only in this single instance, although parts of it recur elsewhere; it is also unconvincing for him to assume that this single instance implies that “*satipaṭṭhāna* meditations are a form of recollection”. As I hope to have clarified in my earlier paper (Anālayo 2018b), the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness is not about recalling what happened a long time ago.

A relationship of mindfulness to remembering what happened a long time ago occurs in several passages, but only some of these serve as a “definition” of mindfulness. In addition to the passage mentioned above, these are SN 48.9 for mindfulness as one of the five faculties (*indriya*, *indriya*, 根, *dbang po*) and AN 5.14 for mindfulness as one of the five powers (*bala*, *bala*, 力, *stobs*); see also AN 7.4 for the same in a listing of seven powers.

Alternatively, however, definitions of mindfulness as one of the five faculties in SN 48.8 and SN 48.11 mention the four establishments of mindfulness, without referring to the past. Similarly, an alternative definition of mindfulness as one of the five powers in AN 5.15 just speaks of the four establishments of mindfulness. In sum, the Pāli discourses do not present “only one definition of *sati*.”

The situation becomes even more nuanced once one adopts a comparative perspective, by consulting the Chinese *Āgama* parallels. Although in the Chinese *Āgamas* the relationship of mindfulness to remembering what happened a long time ago is also found, the parallels to the Pāli discourses quoted above, concerning the “definition” of mindfulness as a faculty or as a power, consistently speak of the four establishments of mindfulness only: SĀ 646 (parallel to SN 48.8), SĀ 647 (parallel to SN 48.9 and SN 48.10), SĀ 675 (parallel to AN 5.14), and SĀ 691 (parallel to AN 7.4). This in turn implies that, as far as the definition of mindfulness in early Buddhism is concerned, the consensus of the extant sources points to the four establishments of mindfulness and not to remembering what happened a long time ago.

Mindfulness and Wisdom

Levman (2018b) remarked that

when Ven. Anālayo argues that it is “clearly not the position taken in the early Buddhist discourses” to relate *sati* to wisdom, it is not clear to me what he means.

A full quotation of the above extract, instead of being supplemented by his own wording, would have shown that my point was about relating mindfulness “categorically” to

[p. 1989]

wisdom (Anālayo 2018a, p. 1048), in the sense that wisdom becomes an intrinsic property of mindfulness. In the same paper (Anālayo 2018a, p. 1050), I explained that:

When Levman (2018a) states that “*sati* is recollection with wisdom, that is, recollecting the Buddha’s teaching”, he seems to attribute to *sati* tasks that, in the early Buddhist analysis of the mind, are instead performed by other mental qualities that collaborate with mindfulness but are not identical with it. This holds for *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation and also for the awakening factors, where the factor of investigation-of-phenomena is responsible for generating meditative wisdom, based on the previous establishment of mindfulness. Although mindfulness lays the necessary foundation, it needs the collaboration of other qualities in order to result in wisdom.

This is quite different from the idea that mindfulness cannot have any relation to wisdom at all. Thus, the whole section on “*sati* and wisdom” in Levman (2018b) is based on a serious misunderstanding. In fact, I have explored in detail the potential of mindfulness meditation to bring about liberating insight and wisdom in each of my three monograph studies of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation (Anālayo 2003, 2013, and 2018c). In the article that forms the object of Levman’s present reply, I offered the following simile in order to illustrate the difference between wisdom as an intrinsic quality categorically related to mindfulness and the early Buddhist understanding of mindfulness (Anālayo 2018a, p. 1050):

The role of mindfulness in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation could perhaps be compared to clear water used for making a soup. Although there is no soup without water, the flavours of the soup are due to the spices or other ingredients employed, not because of the water on its own. Similarly, although there is no *satipaṭṭhāna* without mindfulness, the different insights resulting from *satipaṭṭhāna* are due to other qualities collaborating with *sati*, especially clearly knowing, and not because of mindfulness on its own.

When I state that water is not in itself spicy, this does not imply that spices cannot be added to it to make a soup. My point is only to clarify the intrinsic properties of water. Once it has been clarified that water is not in itself spicy, it follows that there is no basis for criticizing those who employ water on its own (e.g. for purposes other than making a soup). In the same vein, once at least in early Buddhist thought mindfulness is not seen as intrinsically conjoined with wisdom, there is no basis for criticizing those who employ mindfulness on its own.

Conclusion

Levman (2018b) concluded that

we must take a balanced view of *sati*. Although it is not the same as memory, the memory component is a significant part of its heritage and cannot be ignored; it is not the same as wisdom but it operates with wisdom to produce transformative insight.

This is indeed a balanced view to which I am happy to subscribe. The memory component is significant and elsewhere I have explained how, according to my understanding, this component can be meaningfully related to the overall emphasis of mindfulness meditation on being fully established in the present moment. This can be achieved by taking *sati* to stand for full receptivity and attentiveness to what happens in the present moment such that it can easily be recalled even after a long time (Anālayo 2003, 2013, 2017, 2018c). Again, even though mindfulness can exist in modalities that do not involve wisdom, to produce transformative

insight it requires a collaboration with wisdom. Inasmuch as the main concern of MBIs is not the arousing of transformative insight leading to levels of awakening, however, such interventions can rely on forms of mindfulness that do not involve an explicit component of wisdom.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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

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

Abbreviations

AN, *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama*, SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*

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