The Buddhist Practice of Mindfulness and its Adoption in Non-Religious Settings

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Introduction

In the context of impacts of Buddhist ideas and practices on international cultural notions I would like to look at some of the ways in which the practice of mindfulness which originated in Buddhism has entered various areas of secular society in many parts of the world, in particular in the fields of healthcare, education, stress management, and psychological self-care. In fact, this is a dynamic movement which started approximately fifty years ago and has been accompanied by ongoing scientific research in the areas of neuroscience and psychology.

I would like first of all to look at certain perspectives on mindfulness in Buddhism with the intention of highlighting some of the reasons why certain of its aspects meet with such strong interest internationally. Secondly, I would like to point to some of the conditions which contributed to Buddhist notions of mindfulness coming into the focus of secular societies worldwide. Finally, I would like to share some of my thoughts concerning the question whether, and if so, to which extent nowadays secular applications of mindfulness still mirror original Buddhist notions of it.

The Buddhist Practice of Mindfulness, some perspectives

To begin with, I would like to quote the German Bhikkhu Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994), one of those early Western Buddhist practitioners whose translations of Pāli sources had a lasting impact on the perception and adoption of Buddhism in the West. Regarding mindfulness, he wrote in his book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* published in 1954:

> Right Mindfulness is, in fact, the indispensable basis of Right Living and Right Thinking—everywhere, at any time, for everyone. It has a vital message for all: not only for the confirmed follower of the Buddha and his Doctrine (Dhamma), but for all who

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> endeavor to master the mind that is so hard to control, and who earnestly wish to develop its latent faculties of greater strength and greater happiness (...) for that vast, and still growing, section of humanity that is no longer susceptible to religious and pseudo-religious sedatives, and yet feel, in their lives and minds, the urgency of fundamental problems of a non-material kind calling for solution that neither science nor religions of faith can give.[1]

At the time Bhikkhu Nyanaponika may not have anticipated to which extent in the 21st century, Buddhist based mindfulness practice has, in fact, become quite easily accessible in many parts of the world and outside of Buddhist communities.

Let us now have a short look at mindfulness, which is the common English term for what is called *sati* in Pāli, *smṛti* in Sanskrit, and *dran pa* in Tibetan. In fact, mindfulness lies at the core of Buddhism in that the spiritual development encouraged by the Buddha essentially depends on a differentiating and reflective type of introspection by means of which one is able to perceive one's own conditioned impulses and to learn how to deal with them in wholesome ways. This makes it possible to eventually counteract habituated tendencies of desire, aversion, and ignorance which otherwise perpetuate pain and suffering. From this perspective, mindfulness is what weaves together the moral conduct, the philosophical view, and the training in meditation—and thus all aspects of the entire fabric of Buddhist practice. How would an adept be able to engage in wholesome ethics without mindful awareness of his or her feelings, thoughts and actions? How would an adept be able to develop and integrate right views in the absence of mindful awareness of his or her concepts and conditioned ways of thinking? And how would an adept be able to engage in meditation if he or she would not maintain mindful awareness?

The sequential path of Buddhist practice is often explained by way of the "thirty-seven factors conducive to awakening" in which mindfulness plays a dominant part.[2] In fact, the first four of these thirty-

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1 Siegmund Feniger (1901–1994), Nyanaponika 1965, 7–9.

2 This is already evident from the fact that it occurs eight times within the broader landscape of these thirty-seven "factors conducive to awakening" (Skr.: *bodhipakṣadharmaḥ*; Tib.: *byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos sum cu rtsa bdun*). They consist of seven sets: (1) the fourfold presence of mindfulness (Skr.: *catuḥ-smṛtyupasthāna*; Tib.: *dran pa nye bar bzhag pa bzhi*); (2) the four genuine restraints (Skr.: *catvāri samyakprahāṇāni*; Tib.: *yang dag par spong ba bzhi*); (3) the four bases of miraculous powers (Skr.: *caturṛddhipāda*; Tib.: *rdzu 'phrul gyi rkang pa bzhi*); (4) the five faculties (Skr.: *pañcendriya*; Tib.: *dbang po lnga*); (5) the five strengths (Skr.: *pañcabala*; Tib.: *stobs lnga*); (6) the seven elements for enlightenment (Skr.: *saptabodhyaṅga*; Tib.: *byang chub kyi yan lag bdun*); (7) the noble eightfold path (Skr.: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*; Tib.:

seven comprise the fourfold presence of mindfulness, i.e., mindfulness with respect to the body, sensations, mind states, and the *dharmas/dhammas*.

At this point it might be helpful to point to the terms "presence of mindfulness" or "attending with mindfulness" as the translation of the Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna*, the Pāli *satipaṭṭhāna*, and the Tibetan *dran pa nye bar bzhag pa*. The Pāli *satipaṭṭhāna* as a compound can either be understood as *sati* + *paṭṭhāna* or as *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna* (with the *u* of the latter term being dropped by vowel elision). The first interpretation, i.e., *satipaṭṭhāna* as *sati* + *paṭṭhāna*, is found in a number of commentaries on these four aspects of mindfulness practice associated with Pāli sources. With *sati* meaning "mindfulness" and *paṭṭhāna* meaning something like "aiming at" or "starting point", it led to translations in English such as "foundations of mindfulness". Nevertheless, this reading of the compound seems unlikely, since in the discourses contained in the Pāli canon the corresponding verb *paṭṭhāna* is not found at all. The second possible reading of the compound, i.e., *satipaṭṭhāna* as *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna*, is also substantiated by the Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna* (where due to the sandhi rule the combination of *i* + *u* turns into *yu*). Again, with *sati* (or the Sanskrit *smṛti*) meaning "mindfulness", and *upaṭṭhāna* (or the Sanskrit *upasthāna*) meaning something like "placing near" or "being present" / "attending", the compound can be understood as "presence of mindfulness", "attending with mindfulness", or "attending mindfully."[3] The Tibetan translators who rendered the Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna* in Tibetan as *dran pa nye bar bzhags pa* also interpreted the compound in this way, i.e., as "presence of mindfulness" or "attending with mindfulness".

Moreover, Buddhaghosa (4th c.), the author of the famous *Visuddhimagga*, *The Path of Purification*, attributes three basic meanings to the term *satipaṭṭhāna*:

1. *satipaṭṭhāna* as the domain of mindfulness (*sati-gocara*),
2. *satipaṭṭhāna* in the sense that teachers are beyond expectations and partiality with regard to their students, and
3. *satipaṭṭhāna* simply in the sense of mindfulness. In this case, the compound is not understood as a *tatpuruṣa* compound (i.e., the presence of mindfulness), but as a *karmadhāraya* compound (i.e., a presence which as such *is* mindfulness).[4]

'phags pa'i lam yan lag brgyad pa). For details on this sequential path toward awakening see for example Gethin 2001, 22–23.

[3] For details see Anālayo 2006, 27–28.

[4] Gethin 2001, 33–35.

In Pāli based Buddhism the fourfold presence of mindfulness is often referred to with the term *ekāyano maggo*, the "direct" path[5] toward liberation from suffering. In sutric Mahāyāna Buddhism, the practice of mindfulness is additionally interwoven with the altruistic attitude of *bodhicitta*, both on the conventional and ultimate levels, aiming at accomplishing wisdom imbued with limitless compassion, the central vision of this path[6]. Tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism also incorporates mindfulness in general and the fourfold presence of mindfulness in particular, which is, for example, evident in that certain parts of the pure palace in deity-*maṇḍala*s, such as the columns, symbolize the perfection of these practices. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all of these most interesting details of mindfulness, I would like to point out a few of its essential features:

In Pāli Abhidhamma sources, the word *sati* appears as a mental formation (Pāli: *saṇkhāra*; Sanskr.: *saṃskāra*) in the section dealing with wholesome states of mind, and is invariably called "right mindfulness" (*sammā sati*). Terms that are listed in this context in order to illustrate its nature are recollection (*anussati*), recall (*paṭissati*), remembrance (*saraṇatā*) and absence of forgetfulness (*asammussanatā*)—i.e. representing the literal meaning of the term *sati*—, but also keeping in mind (*dhāraṇatā*), and absence of wandering (*apilāpanatā*).[7]

In a general sense, mindfulness is considered essential for being able to lead an ethical life and maintaining essential principles such as appreciating the Three Jewels. In the context of meditation, mindfulness is closely associated with the quality of clear knowing[8] (Pāli: *sampajañña*, Sanskr.: *samprajanya*, Tib.: *shes bzhin*). All in all, *sati* or *smṛti* is not understood as a self-sufficient, isolated practice[9], but seen as one factor among wholesome states of mind required for cultivating those qualities that will finally enable a practitioner to realize the state of awakening.

In the Sanskrit Abhidharma literature of the northern Indian Sarvāstivāda Vaibhāṣika and the Mahāyānist Vijñānavādins, *smṛti* as a *saṃskāra* or mental formation is not defined as "right mindfulness"

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5 On this term, see Gethin 2001, 32ff., 66 and Anālayo 2006, 27–28.

6 See, for example, the particular passages in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, H 10, vol. 28, and the *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, H 12, vol. 30.

7 Gethin 2011, 270.

8 For explanations regarding the choice of "clear knowing" or "clearly knowing," see Anālayo 2006, 39–41. Alternative translations are: vigilance, introspection, and awareness. In non-religious versions of mindfulness training (for example in MBSR) these two aspects. i.e., mindfulness and clear knowing, are usually not differentiated linguistically. Mindfulness became the umbrella term for both, which already occurred in certain Buddhist contexts, too. See in this regard for example Callahan (tr.) 2019,.202.

9 Cox 1992, 72.

(as in the Pāli Abhidhamma), but is presented as a neutral factor. Here, *smṛti* appears in the enumeration of those five mental formations that determine the object at hand (*viniyata-dharmas*), along with intention (*chanda*), interest (*adhimokṣa*), concentration (*samādhi*), and insight (*prajñā*).[10] In this context, mindfulness is understood as that which allows for the non-loss (*asampramoṣa*) of the object, and the fixing or noting (*abhilapana*) of it by the mind.[11] Mindfulness (*smṛti*) is defined as that which sustains the object-support and thereby provides the circumstance in which the object at hand can be analyzed allowing for insight to arise.[12] In this way, mindfulness is understood as a mental factor of attentive observation and cognitive noting that occurs with other mental activities. It functions as the condition for staying with the present object, the present recollection, as well as for subsequent recollection and as the condition for knowledge and investigation.[13]

In both Pāli and Sanskrit based Buddhist sources, mindfulness is considered a main criterion for generating calm abiding (Pāli: *samatha*; Sansk.: *śamatha*) and deep insight (Pāli: *vipassana*; Sansk.: *vipaśyanā*)—the latter in particular through the above mentioned fourfold presence of mindfulness.[14]

All in all, one may say that in Buddhist sources on mindfulness—from Pāli based Buddhism through Sanskrit based sūtric and tantric scriptures—mindfulness is understood to be closely associated with recollection, recognition, discernment, awareness and attentiveness in various perspectives, providing the condition for wholesome, virtuous and wise choices, for the generation of faith in the Three Jewels, and for calmness and deep insight to arise. Mindfulness is generally understood as one of several qualities that need to be balanced for enabling a practitioner to overcome the reactive patterns of delusion, aversion, and desire. It is therefore seen as the capacity for preventing distraction—whether in form of outer situations or in form of inner states and experiences—which in turn is an indispensable condition for meditation to yield its desired results.

In this general context and in the framework of sutric Mahāyāna Buddhism, I would like to quote Śāntideva (8th cent.) who says in his famous *Bodhicāryāvatāra* in verse V.3:

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10 Kunsang 1997, 24.
11 Cox 1992, 83.
12 Cox 1992, 83.
13 Cox 1992, 86–87.
14 It is therefore not surprising that both certain Asian as well as Western Buddhist meditation teachers simplified the wording of this approach to *vipassanā* qua mindfulness practice. See for example Nyanaponika, Goenka, Gunaratana, Goldstein, Kornfield etc.

> If the roaming elephant, the mind, is tethered on every side by the cord of mindfulness, every danger subsides, and complete prosperity ensues.[15]

And, in *Bodhicāryāvatāra* V.23, he states:

> I make this salutation with my hands to those who guard their mind.
> With all your effort, guard both mindfulness and clear knowing.[16]

To provide just one example from the context of tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism, let's have a look at a quote from the *Śrī Vajramaṇḍālaṃkāra*:

> The one who continuously meditates on the supreme wisdom of nonduality
> equals all the Buddhas who are beyond compare.
> Meditating with the supreme abode of the fourfold presence of mindfulness
> —by virtue of this supreme yoga—, one will soon become like the *vajra*-holder.[17]

Finally, let's have a look at two statements from Sgam po pa (1079–1153), one of the main pioneers of the Bka' brgyud traditions in Tibet. He says in his *Synopsis of the Practice of Sūtra and Mantra* in the context of mahāmudrā practice:

> Never be separate from the *samādhi* of continuous mindfulness.
> By virtue of not being separate from the experience of the connate, body [and] mind unfold as being uncontaminated and the qualities of purification will be obtained.[18]

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15 See Crosby and Skilton (tr.) 1995, *The Bodhicāryāvatāra*, 34. See also Bhattacharya 1960, $53_{1\text{-}2}$, *Bodhicāryāvatāra* V.3: *baddhaśceccittamātaṅgaḥ smṛtirajjvā samantataḥ* | *bhayamastaṃgataṃ sarvaṃ kṛtsnaṃ kalyāṇamāgatam* ||. Translation slightly adapted only for terminology reasons.

16 See Crosby and Skilton (tr.) 1995, *The Bodhicāryāvatāra*, 36. See also Bhattacharya 1960, $58_{1\text{-}2}$, *Bodhicāryāvatāra* V.23: *cittaṃ rakṣitukāmānāṃ mayaiṣa kriyate'ñjaliḥ* | *smṛtiṃ ca saṃprajanyaṃ ca sarvayatnena rakṣata* ||. Translation slightly adapted only for terminology reasons.

17 *Śrī Vajramaṇḍālaṃkāra Mahātantrarājā* (Tib. *Dpal rdo rje snying po rgyan ces bya ba'i rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po*), H 459, vol. 86, $104b_{6}$: *gnyis su med pa'i ye shes mchog* || *gang gis rtag tu sgom pa ni* || *mnyam med sangs rgyas kun dang mtshungs* || *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa bzhi* || *mchog gi gnas kyis bsgoms na ni* || *rnal 'byor mchog gis mi ring bar* || *rdo rje 'dzin pa lta bur 'gyur* ||.

18 *Mdo sngags kyi sgom don bsdus pa*, see Sgam po pa in Gampopa, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 205_{5}–306_{1}: *dus rtag tu dran pa rgyun chags kyi ting nge dzin dang mi 'bral bar bya* |

And, in his *Presentation of the Three Trainings*, he says:

> The wisdom [that arises] from meditation is beyond words and the intellect. If one wonders how to bring this on the path, [the reply is that] it is brought on the path through mindfulness.[19]

Which conditions contributed to Buddhist mindfulness coming into the focus of secular societies worldwide?

A first step through which mindfulness became accessible via an English translation of *sati*[20] was taken in 1845. Daniel J. Gogerly (1792–1862), a British missionary active in the then Ceylon, rendered *sammā-sati* in the context of the eightfold noble path with "correct meditation".[21] In 1850, Robert S. Hardy (1803–1868), another British missionary, translated *sati* with "conscience", defining it as "the faculty that reasons on moral subjects; that which prevents a man from doing wrong, and prompts him to do that which is right". He also rendered *sati* as "mental application".[22] The fourfold presence of mindfulness he explained as the "four subjects of thought upon which the attention must be fixed, and that must be rightly understood". In 1871, Henry Alabaster (1836–1884), who was one of the first British diplomats in Thailand, published *The Wheel of the Law* where he goes, among others, into the eightfold noble path and renders the Pāli term *sati* consistently with *mindfulness*.[23] Ten years later, in 1881, Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) continues to use this English translation for *sati*.[24] Since then, this term has been used in the Anglophone world of Buddhist

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lhan cig skyes pa'i nyams dang mi 'bral ba'i sgo nas | zag pa med par lus sems phab ste sbyangs ba'i yon tan thob par bya |.

19 *Bslab gsum rnam gzhag*, see Sgam po pa in Gampopa, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 383$_2$: *sgom pa'i shes rab ni tshig dang blo las 'das pa yin | 'o na lam du ji ltar 'khyer na | dran pas lam du 'khyer te …*

20 The word *sati* or *smṛti* in Sanskrit as such simply means "recollection, remembrance." Still, as will become clear below, "mindfulness" turned out to be an excellent choice in English. To compare the literal meaning of *sati* with the one of mindfulness in English, the following entry in the Oxford English Dictionary supports the choice of this English term "mindfulness" as: "the state or quality of being mindful; attention; memory, intention, purpose".

21 Lopez 2012, 94. Hardy's publication appeared in a paper presented at the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asian Society.

22 Lopez 2012, 94.

23 Shaw 2020, 11. The complete title of Alabaster's publication was: *The Wheel of the Law: Buddhism Illustrate from Siamese Sources by the Modern Buddhist, A Life of Buddha, and an Account of the Phrabat*.

24 Rhys Davids 1891, 107. The collection *Buddhist Suttas* appeared in the *Sacred Books of the East* series edited by Max Müller. See also Gethin 2011, 1 and Lopez 2012, 94. In his publications, Rhys Davids called the seventh element of the eightfold noble path "right mindfulness, the watchful, active mind", see Rhys Davids 1891, 58.

studies and practice[25] and, as a consequence of this, in secular applications of mindfulness.

As pointed out earlier, mindfulness has certainly always been at the core of Buddhist practice. Yet, in the wake of the many political and sociocultural changes in Southeast Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries, its application was strongly emphasized or even revived by a number of Buddhist teachers. In Burma, for example, after the overthrow of the Burmese king by the British in 1885, the Burmese *saṅgharāja* who was traditionally appointed by the king lost his status as well. Individual monks, fearing the collapse of Buddhism in Burma, committed themselves to preserving the teachings by spreading them as widely as possible. They reached out to laypeople, teaching them meditation, which up till then had not been the norm. In particular, one monk called U Nerada (1870–1955) chose the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* as a representative text, simplified the method and highlighted the technique of mindfulness of the breath. As a result the practice now called *vipassanā* based on the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, the so-called "Burmese method", became common practice in Burma. Naturally, the instructions focused on were anchored in the Pāli canon and its commentaries.

One of the Westerners, who, as early as 1954, came into contact with this Burmese method when he traveled to Burma for a meeting of Buddhist scholars, was the above-mentioned German Bhikkhu Nyanaponika Thera (Siegmund Feniger, 1901–1994). Having already learned and practiced mindfulness meditation in Sri Lanka, he received further instructions from Burmese meditation teachers such as Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904–1982).[26] Nyanaponika was very enthusiastic about this technique, probably being the first Western teacher to consider it universal, applicable not only by followers of the Buddha, as pointed to already in the beginning of this paper.

For Nyanaponika, mindfulness in general is mainly about relating to an object of perception when having "brought it to the mind," or having "paid attention" (*manasikāra*) to it—features which are understood to be present in every cognitive act. In particular, Nyanaponika understands mindfulness as a kind of "bare attention".[27] This he contrasts with the habit of judging what is perceived. Habitually what is perceived is related to through the lens of subjective judgments

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[25] See, for example, Chalmers in his partial translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (1926), Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F.L. Woodward in their translation of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (1917–1930), E.M. Hare and F.L.Woodward in their translation of the *Anguttara Nikāya* (1932–1936), and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli in his translation of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (1956).

[26] Gethin 2011, 266.

[27] Ibid., 30.

triggered by preconceived ideas and personality[28]. Relating to what is perceived with bare attention, i.e. mindfulness as understood by Nyanaponika, counteracts this automatic process; one learns to see things differently. For Nyanaponika, mindfulness in the sense of this bare attention presents an elementary aspect of the entire practice of right mindfulness as one constituent of the eightfold path. Nyanaponika's translations and teachings had a strong impact on the Buddhist Theravāda communities in the West.

Another prominent example of a Buddhist teacher who focused on the so-called Burmese method and was also an important teacher for many of the first-generation Western mindfulness teachers, was the Indian *vipassanā* teacher Satya Naraya Goenka (1924–2013) who was born in Burma and received his training from the Burmese teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin. He was a lay person and a businessman. The initial reason for him turning to meditation was his wish to become free of his severe migraine. In 1969, after moving to India, he started his worldwide 10-day non-commercial *vipassanā* retreats, emphasizing that the Buddha's path to liberation from suffering is non-sectarian, universal, and scientific in character. On account of his activities, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 2012, the third highest civilian honor in India for social work. He was also invited to speak at the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations in New York City—on the occasion of the "Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders"—and lectured worldwide, among others at the influential "World Economic Forum" in Davos, Switzerland. In the Huffington Post he was once called "The Man who Taught the World to Meditate".[29]

The publications and activities of teachers such as Nyanaponika and Goenka and the English translation of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli[30] as well as their respective teachers from Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, decisively influenced a number of prominent modern Western teachers of Buddhist meditation such as Jack Kornfield (b. 1945), Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944), and Sharon Salzberg (b. 1952). Of course, there are a number of differences in the precise ways of meditating depending on the emphasis of the particular teachers. Yet, a common theme in their presentation of mindfulness is that it is considered as a non-judgmental direct observation of the mind and the body in the present moment and that this bare attention is identified with insight (*vipassanā*).[31] In the West, these approaches are nowadays often subsumed under the term Vipassanā Buddhism or

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[28] Ibid., 32.

[29] Jay Michaelson (30 September 2013). "S.N.Goenka: the Man who Taught the World to Meditate." Huffington Post.

[30] See Ñāṇapoṇika 1965. First published in 1956 and reprinted many times.

[31] Gethin 2011, 267.

simply vipassanā. And to be sure, those listed above are just some prominent examples among many others.

Moreover, one scholar bhikkhu who, in the last decades, with both his teaching activities and his numerous publications, has contributed tremendously to the Western perception and adaptation of mindfulness is the German Bhikkhu Anālayo (b. 1962).

All in all, due to the above mentioned emphasis on the fourfold presence of mindfulness in Buddhist traditions anchored in the Pāli canon and associated commentaries in the 19th and 20th centuries as well as due to the strong interest of Western Buddhist practitioners therein, mindfulness, at least in the Western hemisphere and since the 20th century became mainly associated with the corresponding Pāli sources and the way these scriptures inform Buddhist practice in different South Asian and Southeast Asian traditions. The various Mahāyāna aspects of the practice of mindfulness, however, appear to have been somewhat neglected.

Instrumental in adapting the Buddhist practice of mindfulness in secular circumstances—for the sake of reducing suffering here and now, yet without the explicit orientation toward enlightenment—was Prof. (emeritus) Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944). He had been practicing Buddhism in a Korean Zen tradition as well as according to Pāli based sources for decades before becoming active in 1979 as a mindfulness teacher at the University of Massachusetts, Medical School. In this environment, i.e. a university hospital, and accompanied by scientific research, he established a mindfulness-based training with the intention and hope that this would enable "mainstream Americans" to better cope with stress, pain, and illness or, in other words, to alleviate suffering. In his various publications he stresses that mindfulness-based interventions have to be grounded in a universal understanding of dharma that is congruent with the Buddha Dharma but not constrained by its historical, cultural and religious manifestations associated with its countries of origin and their unique traditions. Kabat-Zinn's concern was and is to present this type of mind training in a commonsensical and evidence-based way, so that it would become a natural and legitimate element of regular health care instead of being considered applicable only in specific religious contexts[32]. From this perspective and with this intention, he developed the so-called MBSR, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, an 8-week training program incorporating Buddhist mindfulness-based meditation and hatha yoga.

The definitions of mindfulness found in modern secular literature on mindfulness-based interventions emphasize its attentive, intentional, present-centered, and non-judgmental character. In this

[32] Kabat-Zinn 2011, 282.

context, the aspect of being non-judgmental is, in general, interpreted as learning to refrain from a conditioned affective reactivity which allows for more adequate responses to what a situation calls for. Being present-centered is understood as the required capacity to counteract the habitual tendencies of drifting away in conceptualizations regarding the past or the future and getting lost therein, instead of being in touch with the present experience itself.

Moreover, Kabat-Zinn himself states that he is using the term mindfulness as a synonym for pure awareness and says:

> The operational definition that I offered around the work of MBSR and the intentional cultivation of mindfulness (or access to mindfulness) is that mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. Non-judgmentally does not mean that there will not be plenty of judging and evaluating going on—of course there will be. Non-judgmental means to be aware of how judgmental the mind can be, and as best we can, not getting caught in it or recognizing when we are and not compounding our suffering by judging the judging.

He declares that from the start, this mindfulness training, which, as mentioned above, originated within a hospital, intended to follow both the Hippocratic Oath and the Bodhisattva Vow which are both oriented to supporting others with all one's energy, putting the alleviation of other people's suffering above one's own.[33]

Kabat-Zinn's model of MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) became the inspiration for adapting this basic principle of an 8-week training program to particular requirements. Examples for that are the so-called MBCT (Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy) which is used in psychotherapeutic circles to prevent relapses in depression, and MBSL (Mindfulness Based Selflove), to name just two of a number of specific applications. The focus yet remains the same, namely to reduce stress reactivity in its various forms and to enhance a person's capacity to cope with and recover from the allostatic load of suffering.

Monitored by medical researchers and neuro-scientists such as for example Richard Davidson who is also instrumental in the "Mind and Life" programs associated with the Dalai Lama, these types of trainings in mindfulness have been tested for their benefits in health issues both physiological as well as psychological. As a result, in the last decades numerous, in fact at least 60, universities have started to include mindfulness in their curricula and research fields. Examples for this are, in the US, the "Langer Mindfulness Institute" at Harvard University, the "Contemplative Studies Initiative" at Brown University in

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[33] Kabat-Zinn 2017, 1127.

Providence, Rhode Island, or the "Center for Healthy Minds" at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with its vision "to cultivate well-being and relieve suffering through a scientific understanding of the mind." Examples in Europe are the "Oxford Mindfulness Centre" at Oxford University, the "Center for Mindfulness Research and Practice" at Bangor University in Wales and the "Mindfulness and Compassion" program at the Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule in Austria, which offers a Master of Science curriculum in mindfulness training.

Jon Kabat-Zinn remarked in one of his papers in 2017 regarding the numerous studies focusing on mindfulness:

> Academic volumes may not change the world all that much, but they sometimes put their finger on the pulse of emergent possibilities in science and medicine that can augur transformative changes in planetary culture.[34]

Apart from these academic mindfulness trainings and associated research, general mindfulness programs are offered to children and students at schools and universities, in companies, in medical hospitals, psychosomatic institutions, prisons etc. etc. and, of course, for individuals on a private basis as well. And, internationally, there are a number of mindfulness teacher other than those mentioned above, who—during the last decades—contributed a lot toward making the practice of mindfulness accessible in secular circumstances through books, seminars and online courses.[35]

Furthermore, besides the growing number of research papers concerning the application of mindfulness and its effects, as well as the growing number of general publications on mindfulness in various contexts, during the last decade a number of apps have been created which offer guided meditations and practical instructions for mindfulness. Examples in this regard are: "insight timer", "headspace", "breathe" etc. etc. And, one should also point to the fact that the more popular mindfulness becomes, the more one can observe rather superficial ways of relating to it as well as commercializing it, by reducing mindfulness to a technique for relaxation and general wellness.

All that said, I certainly do not want to suggest that mindfulness training has become a so-called mainstream in secular societies. If one were to ask people on the streets of New York, London, Paris, Berlin, or Vienna whether they know about mindfulness practice, a large

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[34] Kabat-Zinn 2017, 1126.

[35] To mentions just a few more names, for example Alan Wallace, Mark Williams, Jack Kornfield, Tara Brach and others.

percentage would not know what one is asking about. Nevertheless, one can certainly say that through all of the above-mentioned developments, Buddhist based mindfulness training has become easily accessible in many countries on this globe, both in the West as well as in Asia and outside the framework of Buddhist religious institutions.

In this context, it should also be mentioned that there are a number of critical voices regarding this development as well. They range from those who consider this training as too superficial, lacking the depth, context, and vision of mindfulness as practiced in Buddhism, to those who consider this training as some kind of Buddhism in disguise. Others again criticize the training for being too self-centered and even for indirectly contributing to making people refrain from standing up against injustice and discrimination in neoliberal consumer societies, even referring to it as a new capitalist spirituality. Criticism is also raised with regard to the objectivity of research on the effects of mindfulness applications. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into these critical voices in detail.

Do these secular applications of mindfulness still mirror original Buddhist notions of mindfulness and if so, to which extent?

While, at least to myself, it is evident that training in mindfulness in nonreligious circumstances can be of substantial benefit for those engaging in it, the question remains whether the associated understanding and application of mindfulness still reflect the meaning and application of mindfulness as taught in classical Buddhist texts.

As pointed out above, the Buddhist notion of mindfulness, i.e., *sati*/*smṛti*/*dran pa* involves, among others, keeping in mind, not being absentminded and forgetful, being focused and present-centered, being face to face with an object of awareness. Up to here, it appears that modern mindfulness-based interventions tread the same path. However, the Buddhist notion of mindfulness also involves recollecting the value of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha which is not at all part of secular mindfulness applications. As well, in Buddhism, an essential aspect of mindfulness is discerning what is unwholesome and wholesome and cultivating the latter. This is part of the explicit training in moral and ethics which, as commonly known, is the foundation of the Buddhist path. Most secular mindfulness applications, however, do not teach ethics explicitly but choose to appeal indirectly to the conscience of the individual, encouraging the trainees to become more aware of their behavior.

Moreover, in the context of meditation there is a common Buddhist consensus that mindfulness is an essential quality for a meditator to achieve tranquility and that it provides the ground for discerning reality so that deep insight can develop and affliction driven reactivity

that inevitably results in an increase of suffering can be released. Again, up to here, there are strong similarities. Yet, in the Buddhist framework, both tranquility and deep insight are oriented toward overcoming ignorance and self-clinging so that suffering can be completely eradicated. Based in renunciation, the aim of practicing Buddhists at large is to transcend cyclic existence by realizing impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. This soteriological vision has virtually and quite naturally disappeared from modern mindfulness applications outside the Buddhist setting.

However, while the issue of selflessness or essencelessness is not made explicit, modern nonreligious mindfulness-based interventions (maybe not all, but a number of them) strongly emphasize the fleeting nature of phenomena, thereby encouraging practitioners to reduce their over-identification with the body as well as with thoughts and emotions. Indirectly—though not explicitly—they thus point to impermanence, suffering, and selflessness and encourage the trainees to experience the constant flux of change, moment by moment. It is from this perspective that mindfulness-based interventions can support trainees in letting go of the largely subconscious pattern of holding on to the notion of permanence and everything which goes along with it.

Moreover, most Buddhists schools would consider the spiritual path of liberation from suffering that evolves through the thirty-seven factors conducive to awakening to take a longer period of training, usually stretching through more than one lifetime. Modern mindfulness-based interventions do not take issue with this at all, but adapt mindfulness to a non-soteriological paradigm which emphasizes the benefit of mindfulness right here and now, instead of applying it with the aim to attain liberation from cyclic existence. It appears that this emphasis on the benefits of mindfulness on one's well-being at present understandably appeals to a growing number of people worldwide.

In short one might say that secular interpretations of mindfulness retain ideas of focusing, of non-distraction and discernment from the Buddhist tradition but adapt them to a non-soteriological paradigm which emphasizes this-worldly benefits to the virtual exclusion of trans-worldly aims. In the modern world where chronic distraction appears to be the norm, modern mindfulness-based interventions thus mainly support people to refocus their attention to the present moment which enables them to be more in touch with life as it unfolds moment by moment.

All in all, I would say that the secular applications of mindfulness offer a vast scope for beneficial use in various areas of society. At the same time, however, there is obviously the danger of it becoming superficial and commercialized. From my point of view a general

judgement of the secular application of mindfulness regarding the question whether it still reflects original Buddhist notions is not really possible in that whether it does, and if so to which extent, mainly depends on the particular teachers conveying the practice of mindfulness to trainees. The benefit which can go along with teaching and practicing mindfulness in this non-soteriological sense thus mainly depends on the intention, the knowledge, the experience, and the integrity of the particular teachers as well as on the intention, the aims and the practice of the trainees.

All in all, there is, for sure, a substantial potential of benefit involved. And it is from this perspective that I would like to end this paper with another quote from Jon Kabat-Zinn:

> … the mainstreaming of mindfulness in the world has always been anchored in the ethical framework that lies at the very heart of the original teachings of the Buddha. Sila, meaning "virtue" or "moral conduct" in the Pāli language, is represented by the third, fourth, and fifth factors of the Eightfold Path (the fourth of the Four Noble Truths): wise/right speech, wise/right action, and wise/right livelihood. While MBSR does not, nor should it, explicitly address these classical foundations in a clinical context with patients, the Four Noble Truths have always been the soil in which the cultivation of mindfulness via MBSR and other mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) is rooted, and out of which it grows through ongoing practice.[36]

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[36] Kabat-Zinn 2017, 1125.

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