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Re-contextualising mindfulness:

Theravada Buddhist perspectives on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of awareness

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Abstract

Although mindfulness has been embraced by the West, this has mostly been a secular 'de-contextualised' form of mindfulness, dis-embedded from its original Buddhist nexus of beliefs/practices. This has arguably deprived the practice of its potential to effect more radical psychospiritual development. This paper therefore argues for the 're-contextualisation' of mindfulness, drawing explicitly on Buddhist philosophy to enhance our appreciation of it, and offers a contribution to such re-contextualisation. It presents a novel (in the context of Western psychology) theoretical model of mindfulness, drawing on concepts in *Theravada* Buddhist literature. In particular, it suggests that Buddhism identifies *three* main 'forms' of mindfulness: *sati* (awareness of the present moment), *appamada* (awareness suffused with ethical care), and *sampajañña* (awareness suffused with a sense of spiritual development). Although currently only *sati* has been recognised in the West, we have much to gain from also recognising the potential ethical and spiritual dimensions of mindfulness.

Key Words: mindfulness; awareness; sati; ethics; precepts; spiritual development.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in mindfulness in ‘the West,’ both in academia and professional practice, and in society at large. However, while these developments are to be welcomed, concerns are beginning to be raised regarding the way in which mindfulness is being interpreted and communicated to Western audiences. A key issue is the way mindfulness has been largely ‘de-contextualised’ from its antecedent Buddhist roots, taken out of the wider nexus of ideas and practices in which it was originally developed (Van Gordon et al., 2015a). Among the scholars and practitioners who helped bring mindfulness to the West, there has generally been an attempt to convey it in a package that would be amenable to secular Western audiences, shorn of religious or esoteric accretions that such audiences might find off-putting, and frequently eschewing explicit reference to Buddhism (Shapiro, 1994). This kind of secularisation has mainly occurred through mindfulness being operationalised using concepts and discourses taken from academic psychology, particularly cognitive theories of attention (Bishop et al., 2004).

Before discussing why these secularising efforts may be problematic, let us acknowledge that they have been (a) necessary and (b) useful. First, without this secularisation, mindfulness would arguably not have made the impact in the West it has done (King, 1999). Second, even in this decontextualized way, mindfulness has been utilized successfully across diverse academic and professional fields, from education (Napoli et al., 2005) to healthcare (Fortney & Taylor, 2010). However, while current secularised conceptions of mindfulness are valuable as far as they go, in being decontextualized from its Buddhist roots, this current value is nevertheless limited. In its original Buddhist context, mindfulness was embedded within a comprehensive system of philosophy and practice aimed at personal transformation. Taken out of this context, its potential is arguably thus neutered and diminished. This issue has been recognised by Kabat-Zinn himself, despite – or perhaps because of – his key role in bringing mindfulness to the West by developing secularised modes of delivery, such as his seminal Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). While of course still upholding the value of such programmes, he commented that ‘the rush to define mindfulness within Western psychology may wind up denaturing it in fundamental ways,’ and as such there is ‘the potential for something priceless to be lost’ (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p.4).

Thus, the current paper argues that, now mindfulness *has* been widely accepted in the West, we might benefit from *re*-contextualising it, i.e., explicitly re-situating it in the context of Buddhist theory and practice. Before setting out one way of doing so, it is worth emphasising that there are many possible avenues such re-contextualisation might take. Since its origins some 2,500 years ago, Buddhism has flowered into a rich and complex body of teachings, encompassing numerous schools

of thought, rivalling Christianity (and indeed most main religions) in terms of denominational diversity and schismatic complexity. In broad brush strokes, there are three main Buddhist branches: *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayana*. *Theravāda* ('Doctrine of the Elders') is the oldest branch, coming into being around the first century B.C.E (Collins, 2005). Its emergence is entwined with the formation of the 'Pāli canon' (also known as the *Tiṭṭaka*, or 'three baskets'), in which the Buddha's teachings were preserved in writing (having hitherto only been transmitted orally). This comprises: (a) the *Vinaya piṭaka* (monastic rules); (b) the *Sutta piṭaka* (discourses/sayings, mostly attributed to the Buddha, divided into five *Nikāya* [volumes], the *Dīgha* [long], *Majjhima* [middle-length], *Samyutta* [thematically linked], *Anguttara* [gradual], and *Khuddaka* [minor] *Nikāya*); and (c) the *Abhidhamma piṭaka* (scholastic treatment of the *suttas*). The *Theravāda* school was the name given to Buddhist communities who closely adhered to the canon (although even then, such communities were engaged in selective exegesis and interpretation of these 'original' teachings). *Mahāyāna* is used as an overarching label for diverse schools of thought that began to emerge around the first century C.E., which started adapting/developing the Buddha's teachings in new and innovative ways, such as the dialectical philosophy of Nāgārjuna (circa 150–250 C.E.) (Walser, 2013). Finally, *Vajrayana* refers to a further efflorescence of philosophical and ritualistic development that occurred from the third century C.E. onwards, particularly in Tibet (Davidson, 2003).

Given such denominational complexities, there are many possible ways of re-contextualising mindfulness; as such, the current paper offers but one contribution to, or one aspect of, this kind of re-contextualisation. Indeed, we are beginning to see other re-contextualisation efforts, such as Kudesia and Nyima (2014), who focus on Tibetan Buddhism. So, in the aim of reflexive openness, the current paper is written from a *Theravāda* perspective, and more specifically, *Theravāda* as interpreted and elucidated by the contemporary English Buddhist teacher Ugyen Sangharakshita (2003). (Sangharakshita was ordained within the *Therevada* tradition in India in 1950, returning to the UK to found the Western Buddhist Order in 1967 (renamed in 2010 as the Triratna Buddhist Order/Community), now one of the largest Buddhist movements in the UK (Bluck, 2006).) According to Sangharakshita's interpretation of *Theravāda*, it is possible to identify *three* different 'types' mindfulness in the *Pāli* canon, i.e., three different *Pāli* words which are all conceptually related to awareness: *sati* (awareness of the present moment), *appamada* (awareness suffused with an ethos of ethical care), and *sampajañña* (awareness suffused with a sense of spiritual progress). However, somewhat by historical accident, only the first of these, *sati*, has been engaged with by the West, and presented as *the* conceptual root of mindfulness. Consequently, Western conceptualisations of mindfulness are to some extent missing the ethical dimension of awareness found in *appamada*, and the spiritual dimension of awareness contained in *sampajañña*.

In order to elucidate the differences between these three types, the paper draws upon a teaching that is central to Buddhism, namely *paṭiccasamuppāda*, i.e., the law of conditionality. Essentially, this teaching expresses the Buddha's insight into the causal nature of the universe, into the ordered relationship between conditions and their effects. As expressed by the Buddha (in the *Cūḷasakuludāyi sutta*, as well as elsewhere in the *Nikāya*; Shulman, 2008): 'This being, that exists; through the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not exist; through the ceasing of this, that ceases' (MN [*Majjhima Nikāya*] 79). Within Buddhist philosophy, this is arguably the 'meta' law that underpins all other laws, such as the second Noble truth (that suffering has a cause) (Kang, 2009). Understanding this teaching is thus seen as the key to wellbeing, and ultimately to freedom from suffering. As Sangharakshita and Subhuti (2013, p.49) put it, 'once we have understood and are fully convinced about the nature of reality as *paṭiccasamuppāda*, we align ourselves with those regularities or laws that lead us to liberation.'

This law has been expounded upon in various ways in Buddhist literature. One influential analysis – developed by Buddhaghosa in the 5th Century C.E. – is the identification of five different 'levels' of conditionality, known as the fivefold *niyāmas*. (It should be noted that the Buddha is only recorded as discussing the *niyāmas* individually in the *piṭakas* (Jones, 2012). The synthesis of the *niyāmas* into a fivefold schema was an act of interpretative exegesis on the part of Buddhaghosa. This can be found in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (Sv ii.432), Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dīgha nikāya*, where it occurs in the context of a discussion of the meaning of *dhammatā* (i.e., order of events) in the *Mahāpadāna sutta* (DA ii.432).) *Niyāmas* are 'laws, conditions or constraints that govern processes or phenomena' (Keown, 2003); collectively then, the fivefold *niyāmas* identify five different domains of life that are subject to causal law-like principles.

First, *utu-niyāma* is the 'law of the seasons,' describing the observable cyclical regularity of environmental phenomena (e.g., seasonal patterns). Regarded anachronistically (i.e., in the context of contemporary scientific understanding), this is the domain of non-organic physical laws (e.g., the law of gravity). Second, *bīja-niyāma* is the 'law of seeds,' describing observable patterns in the realm of organic phenomena (e.g., reproductive continuity). Again, regarded anachronistically, this is the domain of biochemistry (e.g., genetic inheritance of phenotypes). Third, *citta-niyāma* is the 'law of the mind,' describing causal patterns among mental events (e.g., the way thoughts give rise to particular feelings). Regarded anachronistically, this is the domain of psychology (e.g., phenomena such as classical conditioning). Fourth, *kamma-niyāma* is the law of '*karma*,' which describes the way actions have consequences (or, in Buddhaghosa's phraseology, 'the desirable and undesirable results following good and bad action'); this is the domain of ethics and morality. ('*Karma*' is the Sanskrit equivalent of the *Pāli* '*Kamma*.' Although *karma* has entered the English language, for consistency

this paper will keep to the Pāli version.) Finally, *dhamma-niyāma* is the ‘law of nature,’ which in this context refers to the ‘spiritual potential’ inherent in the universe, such that it is capable of evolving complex qualities such as consciousness and exemplary beings like the Buddha. Again, regarded anachronistically, we might identify this law with the theory of evolution and, in particular, with emergentist philosophies (e.g., Aurobindo, 1939-1940) which view the universe as evolving towards complex outcomes such as self-consciousness.

The relevance here of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and of the fivefold *niyāmas* specifically, is that different types of mindfulness might be regarded as being attuned to different *niyāmas*. As set out below, *sati* (i.e., present-moment awareness) might be viewed as focused primarily on the first three *niyāma* (*utu*, *bija*, and especially *citta*). However, it is arguably not until the cultivation of *appamada* that one really becomes cognizant of *kamma niyāma*, i.e., appreciative of the ethical dimensions of one’s actions. Then, it is only through the subsequent emergence of *sampajañña* that one truly develops an understanding of *dhamma niyāma*, i.e., a conscious and over-riding concern with psychospiritual development. As such, we will see that by focusing on *sati*-type mindfulness alone – as the West has hitherto largely done – the more far-reaching, transformative potentials inherent in *appamada* and *sampajañña* forms of mindfulness are largely missed out on. So, the current paper aims to bring these concepts and teachings within the fold of Western psychology, thereby allowing such possibilities to be embraced. These ideas will be expounded upon in three sections, discussing the three types of mindfulness in turn. Each section will: (a) introduce the type of mindfulness; (b) explore it from a Western psychological perspective; (c) examine it from a Buddhist perspective; and (d) consider its therapeutic significance. At the end, a concluding section will offer recommendations for how the central points of the paper can be harnessed in clinical/therapeutic practice.

***Sati*-mindfulness: Awareness of the present moment**

Introducing sati

We begin by considering *sati*-mindfulness, since *sati* is invariably cited by pioneers such as Kabat-Zinn (2003) as the conceptual origin for their conceptualisations of mindfulness. Indeed, the term mindfulness was first coined by the great Buddhist scholar T. W. Rhys Davids as a translation of *sati* (Gethin, 2011). Interestingly, as Gethin notes, Rhys Davids toyed with various terms before settling on mindfulness: in Rhys Davids’ 1881 publication of Buddhist *suttas*, *sati* was rendered as ‘mental activity’ (p.9) and even simply ‘thought’ (p.63), but it was only with Rhys Davids’ 1910 work that he settled on the term mindfulness. So, what does *sati* mean? In Brahmanical India, the word connoted ‘remembrance’ and ‘recollection,’ though used within a meditative context, this does not refer to historical/chronological memory per se, but to a mental state in which one recollects/remembers the activity that ‘one is engaged in, in the present moment’ (Peacock, 2014, p.6). As Anālayo (2003,

p.48) puts it, *sati*-mindfulness involves remembering to focus on ‘what is otherwise too easily forgotten: the present moment.’

This is the type of awareness that is described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (the Discourse on the establishment of mindfulness; MN 10), regarded as the seminal text in the *Pāli* Canon on the practice of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011). This teaching includes the instruction: ‘Establishing present-moment recollection right where you are, simply breathe in, simply aware, then breathe out, simply aware.’ This type of present-moment awareness is captured in Kabat-Zinn’s (2003, p.145) influential definition of mindfulness – which he stated was based upon *sati* – as ‘the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.’ Thus, given that most contemporary analyses and applications of mindfulness stem directly or indirectly from Kabat-Zinn’s (1982) pioneering operationalization of mindfulness, it is fair to say that mindfulness as currently understood and practiced in the West is based exclusively on *sati*-type awareness. It is worth, then, considering what type of awareness is being encouraged here.

Sati from a Western perspective

One way to appreciate the type of awareness implied by *sati* would be to analyse *sati* in terms of contemporary psychological constructs pertaining to attention and awareness. For instance, Lutz et al. (2008) suggest that meditation practices can be classified into two broad types: focussed attention (FA) and open-monitoring (OM). FA practices can be analysed in terms of modular attention networks, including sustained attention (focusing on particular qualia, such as the breath), executive attention (monitoring distractions from competing stimuli), attention switching (disengaging from distractions), and selective attention (redirecting focus back to the meditative object). Conversely, OM does not involve focusing attention on particular stimuli, but is a broad receptive awareness, an ‘open field capacity to detect arising sensory, feeling and thought events within an unrestricted ‘background’ of awareness, without a ‘grasping’ of these events in an explicitly selected foreground or focus’ (Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010, p.2). Such awareness is characterised by qualities including receptivity, clarity, stability/continuity, flexibility and non-conceptual awareness (Brown et al., 2007). In this context, *sati* might be characterised as a form of OM. (That said, as Chiesa et al. (2011) point out, most mindfulness sessions begin with a period of FA, e.g., focusing on the breath. This is done to ‘stabilise’ one’s awareness for the more expansive phase of OM, in which one strives to simply be non-judgmentally present to one’s phenomenological experience.)

Sati from a Buddhist perspective

From the perspective of our re-contextualising agenda here, another way to consider the question of the nature of *sati* is to ask, what are we mindful of? What types of phenomena are encompassed by our sphere of concern? From a *Theravāda* standpoint, we can address these questions through the fivefold *niyāmas*. *Sati* is arguably centred mainly on the first three *niyāmas*: *utu*, *bija*, and *citta*. In terms of *utu-niyāma*, one would be aware of causality operating in the physical world, appraised through paying attention to our own physicality, our physical surroundings, and to the consequences of actions (of ourselves and others) in this arena. A contemporary example might be the kind of watchful attention one would hope to maintain while driving a car. Secondly, with *bija-niyāma* (causality in the domain of organic matter), *sati* means being aware of our own organic nature, encompassing embodied sensations, including biological processes such as respiration) and how biological laws like aging affect our body. Secondly, this *niyāma* encompasses mindfulness of nature (of the natural environment). Finally, the third level of conditionality is *citta-niyāma*, the ‘law of the mind’ (i.e., recurrent cognitive and phenomenological patterns), the significance of which is discussed immediately below.

Therapeutic implications of sati

Arguably, *sati*-mindfulness of the *citta-niyāma* is the predominant form of awareness promoted in Western approaches to mindfulness. Consider the proliferation of mindfulness-based interventions that have followed in the wake of Kabat-Zinn’s (1982) seminal MBSR programme, all of which teach people to be more aware of their cognitions and emotions, and to notice causal relationships among such phenomena. For instance, the most prominent adaptation of MBSR is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), designed to prevent depressive relapse (Teasdale et al., 2000). Its theoretical premise is Teasdale’s (1988) ‘differential activation hypothesis,’ which holds that previously depressed people are susceptible to relapse due to ‘dysphoria-activated depressogenic thinking’ (Teasdale et al., 2000, p.615). For such people, negative emotions can potentially re-activate negative thought patterns associated with previous depressive episodes, precipitating a downward spiral of negative thoughts and worsening affect, leading to relapse. In MBCT then, participants are helped to develop *sati*-mindfulness of thoughts and feelings, and of causal patterns among these (i.e., habitual thinking patterns). With this awareness, participants are then taught to ‘decentre’ from these qualia – to regard these dispassionately with detached objectivity – rather than getting drawn into them. As Chambers et al. (2009, p.569) put it, MBCT involves ‘retraining awareness,’ enabling people to ‘more consciously choose... thoughts, emotions and sensations... rather than habitually reacting to them.’

The type of *sati*-mindfulness encouraged by interventions such as MBSR and MBCT is very helpful. For instance, in randomised controlled trials, MBCT has been found to reduce relapse rates

for people with three or more previous episodes of depression (Ma & Teasdale, 2004), and as such has been approved by the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2004) as a treatment for recurrent depression. However, in the context of Buddhist philosophy and practice, the value of this kind of mindfulness *alone* is nevertheless limited, and one could argue that people might experience even greater benefits were they to engage with these Buddhist teachings. This could include trying to cultivate the other ‘forms’ of mindfulness featured here, namely *appamada* (with its emphasis on ethical awareness and practice) and *sampajañña* (with its emphasis on spiritual development). Of course, people practising *sati*-mindfulness may well be acting ethically and/or developing spiritually. However, as Stanley (2012) notes, while the *Pāli* canon preserved an ethical dimension to *sati*, when taken out of this context and conceptualised purely as an attention training technique, there is the risk of it becoming de-ethicised and de-spiritualised. Such de-ethicisation of mindfulness is unfortunate, for various reasons. For instance, ethical behaviour is not only desirable from a societal perspective (e.g., maintaining civic harmony), but from a Buddhist perspective, it benefits the actor too, as the next section explores.

***Appamada*-mindfulness: Awareness suffused with an ethos of ethical care**

Introducing appamada

While recognising the value of *sati*, this section raises the idea that people might benefit further from developing an appreciation of the importance of ethical behaviour. With this, we come to the second kind of mindfulness in the *Pāli* canon, *appamada*. It is worth clarifying that this should not be regarded as a *separate* type of mindfulness, distinct from *sati*; rather, it is a quality with which one might try to augment *sati* (Peacock, 2014). Thus, in speaking of *appamada*-mindfulness, really this means an enhanced form of awareness encompassing both *sati* and *appamada*. One way to discern the qualities that *appamada* brings to mindfulness is to consider the range of English translations for it, including earnestness (Müller, 1881), vigilant care (Soeng, 2006), unremitting alertness (Thera, 1941), diligence (Peacock, 2014), and carefulness (Nikaya, 2008). Arguably the best translation is ‘moral watchfulness’ (Rao, 2007, p.69); this reflects the commentary on the *Dhammapada* (*suttas* in the *Khuddaka nikāya*), which describes *appamada* as ‘awareness... with regard to the sphere of qualities of good conduct’ (The Old Commentary of the *Dhammapada*, p.431, cited in Carter, 2005, p.280). As such, we might regard *appamada* as awareness suffused with an ethos of ethical care. The significance of *appamada* is that it introduces an *ethical* dimension to mindfulness, taking it beyond simply awareness of what is happening (i.e., *sati*), and explicitly connecting it to Buddhist teachings on ethics and morality. Before considering such Buddhist teachings though, and the significance of *appamada* in *Theravāda*, it is worth contextualising the discussion by noting the way ethics are treated in Western psychology.

Appamada from a Western perspective

In considering Western conceptualisations of ethics, it is first useful to clarify how they differ from conceptually related phenomena such as values and morals. Values do not necessarily concern right and wrong, but are ‘conceptions of the desirable’ that motivate behaviour and choices (Schwartz, 1999, p.24). In contrast, morals do explicitly involve ‘notions of right and wrong’ (Hazard, 1994, p.451). However, the two are often closely connected, since shared values in a society frequently become the basis for a common moral framework. Ethics then relate to morals in the sense that, while the latter may be unarticulated or implicit, ethics is the explicit codification of such morals in a communally defined and recognised framework. However, it has been suggested that outside of specific contexts, many people tend not to be guided by an explicitly defined ethical code. Common exceptions to this are: abiding by the law of one’s country (Gawande, 2006); being affiliated to a profession that has a formal code (Mitchels & Bond, 2010); and following a religion (Pate & Bondi, 1992). In these cases, people are able to avail themselves of guidance (even if imperfect and fallible) to help them ‘achieve the greatest good and minimise any potential wrongs’ (Mitchels & Bond, 2010, p.5). Outside these cases though, it could be argued that people have to struggle on their own to work out how to act in their own and others’ best interests.

That is not to say such people are acting immorally. For instance, Kohlberg (1981) examined people’s responses to moral dilemmas, and found that people tend to develop through a standard sequences of phases. First, a ‘pre-conventional’ phase, where morality is determined hedonically, involving three stages: egocentric (what feels good); punishment/obedience (what gets rewarded/punished); and instrumental-relativist (what meets one’s needs). Second, a conventional’ phase, with morality determined by societal norms/laws, comprising interpersonal concordance (group approval), then law and order (upholding social order). Finally, a ‘post-conventional’ phase, in which right/wrong are determined by ‘higher’ principles, featuring two stages: social contract-legalistic (general rights) and universal ethical-principle (universal rights). Although some critiques of the model have been aired – for instance, Gilligan (1977) suggested women tend to develop through the same stages in a different way from men, focusing on care rather than justice – the framework has been relatively well-validated over the years (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014). However, this article contends that people might benefit from an explicit ethical code that could accelerate their moral development. Moreover, the key point about *appamada* is not just that one has an ethical code, but keeps ethical considerations at the forefront of their awareness, and acts accordingly, as discussed next.

Appamada from a Buddhist perspective

Like most religions, Buddhist literature is replete with teachings pertaining to morality, and with the codification of such teachings into explicit ethical guidelines and prescriptions. For a start, three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path (see e.g., the *Mahdcattdrisaka-sutta*; MN III 71-78) – the Buddha’s central teaching about how to ameliorate and even escape suffering – are specifically concerned with morality (*sīla*): right speech (*sammā-vācā*), right action (*sammā-kammanta*), and right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*). These three strands of the path are then elaborated upon in various sets of precepts, which elucidate in detail what right speech, action and livelihood consist of. The most widely known ethical framework in the *Pāli* Canon is the *Pañca-sīla* (‘Five precepts’), which encourage abstinence from *pānātipātā* (harming living beings), *adinnadana* (taking the not given), *kamesu micchacara* (misconduct concerning sense pleasures, e.g., sexual misconduct), *musavada* (false speech), and *suramerayamajja pamadatthana* (unmindful states related to consumption of alcohol or drugs). Sangharakshita (2003) points out that these precepts gain further strength if formulated positively, namely as exhortations to cultivate (respectively) *mettā* (loving-kindness), *dana* (generosity), *appichatā* (contentment), *sacca* (truthfulness) and *sati* (awareness). For instance, whereas refraining from harm is arguably a minimum expectation of civilised behaviour, *mettā* is a far stronger prosocial act, which actively incorporates love and care. This issue (of negative versus positive formulations) may be partly a function of the English language, and of the difficulty of finding discursive equivalents when translating terms from the original *Pāli* or *Sanskrit*. For example, a *Pāli* term such as *avihimsā* (non-harm), while being negatively formulated (*vihimsā* means harm/violence, with ‘a’ being a negative prefix), it nevertheless retains positive overtones (concerning love and care) which are not preserved if translated into English as non-harm. As such, Ostergaard (1977) argues that ‘love’ might be a more encompassing translation of *avihimsā*.

For more committed Buddhists, these five precepts are supplemented by more extensive recommendations. For example, the *Pāṭimokkha* (Monastic Disciplinary Code) involves around two hundred rules (versions vary) for monastic life (Keown, 2009). More generally, Buddhist teachings feature exhortations to virtuous living. The *Theravada* tradition emphasises four *brahma-viharas* (‘divine abidings’): *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). Similarly, the Mahayana tradition encourages practitioners to strive towards six *pāramitā* (perfections): *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (morality), *khanti* (patience), *virīya* (perseverance), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (insight). In this light, we might say that *appamada*-mindfulness involves being aware of one’s actions in the light of these ethical guidelines, i.e., being mindful of the extent to which one’s actions are in accordance with these recommendations. Indeed, we might further say that while *sati* involves non-judgemental awareness of the present moment, *appamada*

re-introduces an element of judgement (crucially though, a compassionate form), since practitioners are encouraged to appraise the moral worth of their actions.

Therapeutic implications of appamada

In considering the ethical prescriptions above, it is vital to understand *why* these are recommended in Buddhism. While of course recognising the importance to society of ethical behaviour (in upholding civilizational norms), Buddhism makes the more profound (and persuasive) argument that ethical action also serves the wellbeing of the actor themselves. In essence, the contention is that skilful (i.e., ethical) actions generate future positive mental states, while unskilful (i.e., unethical) actions lead to future negative mental states. As such, whatever else the benefits (i.e., to other people) of ethical behaviour, this insight should help motivate the practitioner to move towards skilful action as far as possible. This insight rests on the teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and in particular on the fourth order of conditionality, the *kamma niyāma*, which is the application of the principle of causality with respect to ethics (Jones, 2012). Now, although the notion of *kamma* has entered Western discourse, it has often been misinterpreted. For instance, it is commonly taken to mean that everything that happens to a person is a result of their past actions. However, this is a misreading of the concept, at least from the perspective of Buddhaghosa. The nuance provided by his fivefold *niyāmas* is that events happen for all manner of reasons, some of which are caused by people's past actions (*kamma niyāma*), and some of which are not (the other four *niyāmas*). At the same time though, Buddhaghosa still holds that every present action will nevertheless cause or contribute to an outcome in the future.

Thus, *appamada*-mindfulness means becoming aware of *kamma niyāma*, i.e., appreciating that actions have consequences. This is not comparable to other religious teachings pertaining to ethics, such as the Christian notion of sin, which holds that one is punished for one's misdeeds through divine retribution (Swinburne, 1989). Rather, the Buddhist notion of *kamma* does not necessarily involve a supernatural agency (although some teachers do interpret it that way), but rather proposes that we are rewarded or punished, in a causal sense, *by* our actions. As Kang (2009, p.73) explains it, 'the law of karma [*kamma*] states that any volitional action rooted in non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion (or in positive terms: generosity, love/compassion, and wisdom) gives rise to virtuous or positive imprints in the mind that would subsequently result in experiences of happiness and pleasure.' Conversely, 'any ethical action rooted in greed, hatred or delusion gives rise to their opposite non-virtuous/negative mental imprints that later result in experiences of suffering and displeasure.' So, as noted above, *Theravada* holds that ethical actions do not only benefit the recipient, but the actor too; thus, people have a vested interest in acting ethically, and should be motivated to act as such. In Kang's words, 'a behavioural guideline that emerges from

such an ethical view of causality is that one ought to engage mindfully in positive karma rooted in positive volitions' (p.73). Thus, *appamada* introduces a further dimension to mindfulness that is not present in *sati* alone: here the practitioner advances beyond simply being aware of their experience, but reflects and judges (compassionately) whether their actions are skilful (e.g., in accordance with the precepts). As such, as discussed in the conclusion, contemporary mindfulness interventions might benefit from introducing *appamada* into their teachings.

Sampajañña: Awareness suffused with a sense of spiritual progress

Introducing sampajañña

This final section will suggest that our appreciation and development of mindfulness can be augmented even further: in addition to cultivating *sati* and *appamada*, one can aim to foster a spiritual aspect to one's awareness, namely *sampajañña*, a third 'form' of mindfulness, which we might define as awareness suffused with a sense of spiritual progress. Again, as with *appamada*, this should not be regarded as a distinct 'type' of mindfulness, separate from the others, but a new quality or dimension that one can bring to mindfulness, thus creating an enriched compound of *sati-appamada-sampajañña* mindfulness.

So, what skills or qualities does *sampajañña* bring to mindfulness? Some scholars interpret this as the ability to 'effortlessly' sustain *sati*. For example, the 8th Century (C.E.) master Śāntideva (2002) states that '*Samprajanya* [*sampajañña*] comes and, once come, does not go again, if *smṛti* [*sati*] stands guard at the door of the mind' (cited in Maharaj, 2013, p.67). Maharaj interprets this as meaning that the 'assiduous practice of *sati*... culminates eventually in the achievement of *samprajanya*, which seems to be a more spontaneous and effortless state of watchfulness of the body and mind.' Beyond this idea of 'effortless' mindfulness, many thinkers associate *sampajañña* specifically with *insight*. For instance, in the foundational *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (MN 10), there is a refrain of *ātāpi sampajāno satimā*, which Bodhi (2011) translates as 'ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful.' Thus, Bodhi suggests that the phrase encompasses three mental factors: *atapi* (ardent) concerns the energy one needs to engage in practice; *sati* is watchful awareness; and *sampajāno* (an adjective relating to the noun *sampajañña*) pertains to clear comprehension. More specifically, Sangharakshita (2003) proposes that *sampajañña* means having insight or 'clear comprehension' of the possibility of spiritual development. Thus, Sangharakshita argues that it might best be translated as 'mindfulness of purpose,' in the sense that 'everything we do should be done with a sense of the direction we want to move in and of whether or not our current action will take us in that direction' (p.13). From this perspective, this kind of awareness supersedes *appamada*-mindfulness. Whereas *appamada* simply means appreciating the value of acting ethically – which could be done in a secular way (as indeed many people do) – *sampajañña* means recognising the possibility of psychospiritual

development, and pursuing this goal accordingly. This, arguably, is the fundamental 'point' of Buddhism: ultimately, all its teachings are focused on helping people overcome suffering and make progress towards spiritual liberation (however defined).

Sampajañña from a Western perspective

Before discussing *Theravada* perspectives on psychospiritual development, it is worth considering how spirituality is treated within Western psychology. In this, spirituality and spiritual development are both contested notions. Regarding spirituality, there are at least four main types of perspectives (Daniels, 2009): religious perspectives that invoke numinosity, e.g., the 'quality of an individual whose inner life is oriented toward God, the supernatural, or the sacred' (Yamane, 1998, p.492); psychological perspectives which aim to understand spirituality in terms of psychophysiological processes, such as Newberg's (2010) neurotheological paradigm; humanistic/existential perspectives, which conceptualise spirituality in terms of developing deeper understanding of and connection with self and others, such as an 'inner search for meaning and fulfilment' (Graber, 2001, p.40); and the ecological perspective, which focuses on humanity's connection to and responsibility towards the natural world (Kinsley, 1995).

Given such diversity of perspectives, conceptualising spiritual development is perhaps even more problematic. Attempts have been made of course, e.g., by systematising scholars like Wilber (2007), who has sought to find commonalities across multiple structural-developmental schemas, including those pertaining to faith (Fowler, 1981) and ego-development (Cook-Greuter, 2004), and moral development (Kohlberg, 1981), together with non-Western sources such as Sri Aurobindo (1939-1940) and the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1960). In Wilber's schematic, people progress through multiple quasi-independent developmental 'lines' (in the manner of Gardner's (1999) multiple intelligences), from Kohlberg's moral stages to Cook-Greuter's ego-development progression. These lines all progress through the same broad phases identified by Kohlberg, i.e., pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (each of which are likewise differentiated into multiple stages). Regarding spiritual development specifically, this is positioned: (a) as a separate line in itself (concerning connection to the sacred), and (b) as the higher levels of all the other lines (e.g., high levels of moral development are regarded as inherently spiritual, as these involve ego transcendence through identification with increasingly wide spheres of existence). As innovative and promising as Wilber's framework is though – and others like it, such as Spiral Dynamics (Beck & Cowan, 1996) – it must currently be regarded as somewhat speculative and untested (Bussey, 2010), even if many of the models within it were developed through empirical analysis. As such, for now, spiritual development is somewhat poorly understood and operationalised in Western psychology.

Sampajañña from a Buddhist perspective

Turning to a *Theravāda* perspective, spiritual development, and particularly *sampajañña* mindfulness, can be understood by returning to the teaching of *paṭiccasamuppādi*. Sangharakshita (2003) proposes that *sampajañña* involves awareness of the final *niyāma*, the *dhamma niyāma*, which refers to the evolutionary potential of the universe to produce exemplary individuals such as the Buddha. From Sangharakshita's perspective, the emergence and cultivation of *sampajañña* means that one would develop a deepening appreciation of the *dhamma-niyāma*, and its radical implications. One such implication is the transformative notion that all beings possess the potential of becoming a Buddha, and that the way to progress towards this is by following a spiritual path. Just as *appamada* entails appreciation of the value of living ethically, *sampajañña* means being convinced of the value and indeed necessity of diligently following such a path. This kind of awareness would inextricably inform one's actions, such that one would evaluate and choose all one's behaviours according to whether they facilitated progress along this path. One might argue that practitioners may have already embarked upon a spiritual path as soon as they have begun engaging with *sati*, and would certainly be making progress along this with the development of *appamada*. However, the emergence of *sampajañña* means a person would make their spiritual development a conscious, explicit and *overriding* priority in their life. As Buddhaghosa put it, while awareness of *kamma niyāma* shows us 'why we should be good,' insight into *dhamma niyāma* informs us why we should 'try to better our good' (Sv ii.432; cited in Jones, 2012, pp.548-549).

In considering the notion of spiritual development, there are numerous structural stage-wise schemas in Buddhist literature. Even just within the *Tipiṭaka*, Bucknell (1984) identifies six different lists of stages. However, rather than adumbrate these lists, we might just highlight one particular framework of spiritual progression, the one promulgated by Sangharakshita (2003) (since he is the prism through which we have viewed *Theravāda* in this paper). This is the Five Path schema, developed by the *Sarvāstivāda* school (circa 240 BCE), as interpreted by Sangharakshita. This conceptualises spiritual development in terms of four broad stages of deepening practice (integration, skilful intention, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth), followed by a fifth goal state (enlightenment). Firstly, integration involves 'cultivating ever-more skilful actions of body, speech and mind, so that progressively more satisfying, subtle, flexible, and open states of consciousness emerge as their fruit' (Sangharakshita & Subhuti, 2013, p.128). One might say that this stage emerges once *sati*-mindfulness begins to evolve into *appamada*-mindfulness, as one starts to develop an emerging appreciation of the connection between one's subjective experience (e.g., in mindfulness practice) and one's actions in the world. Then, as *appamada* develops, a person might be seen as moving into the stage of skilful intention (sometimes referred to by Sangharakshita as the stage of 'positive emotions'). This builds upon the first stage through 'systematic cultivation of skilful

intentions and actions that bring the karmic fruit of a more finely tuned mind” (Sangharakshita & Subhuti, 2013, p.133), such as a more explicit commitment to ethical precepts (e.g., taking vows of ordination). As such, with the stage of skilful intention, practitioners could be said to be established on a spiritual path. At this point, we might suggest that *appamada* evolves into *sampajañña*-mindfulness, in which there is a definite, conscious and dominant feeling of being on such a path.

Subsequently, at some point along this path, the practitioner might enter the stage that Sangharakshita refers to as ‘spiritual death.’ This involves deepening insight into the nature of reality, and in particular, into what Buddhism refers to as the three *lakshanas* (‘marks of conditioned existence’): *anicca* (impermanence), *anattā* (insubstantiality), and *dukkha* (suffering). This central teaching suggests that all phenomena are empty of a fixed, enduring, independent nature, but instead are transitory (*anicca*) and interdependent (*anattā*). (The *lakshanas* are elucidated at numerous points in the Pāli canon, including SN 22.46, 35.1, AN 3.47, and Dhammapada 277-279.) It is the denial or ignorance of these fundamental truths, and the related attempt to attach to phenomena that are inherently subject to change, that is seen as causing suffering (*dukkha*). Spiritual death occurs when these insights are realised with respect to oneself, i.e., one understands the impermanence and insubstantiality of one’s being. Thus, ‘dying’ in this context means relinquishing one’s ‘self-oriented clinging’ (Sangharakshita & Subhuti, 2013, p.133). This does not involve nihilistic self-annihilation, but is rather the precursor to the final stage of spiritual rebirth, i.e., re-birth into a deeper sense of self, one that is coterminous with the *dhamma niyāma*, with the spiritual path itself. At this point, Sangharakshita and Subhuti suggest that one’s own egoic concerns dissipate, and one connects ‘more and more deeply with *dhamma niyāma* processes’ (p.134). At the culmination of this fourth stage, one could be said to enter into a fifth and final goal state, known in the *Sarvāstivāda* schema as the stage of ‘no more learning.’ Here, it is suggested that there is no longer a ‘self’ per se that is making progress, just the *dhamma niyāma* itself working through the medium of the person; this is the omega state of spiritual development, referred to in Buddhism as enlightenment.

Therapeutic implications of sampajañña

In considering the potential therapeutic implications of *sampajañña*, it appears to be potentially very valuable, and yet fraught with issues. In terms of possible benefits, there is much agreement that spirituality can be very valuable and important, both in academic psychological literature (Koenig, 2009) and in ‘spiritual literature’ itself (Wilber, 2007). Positive outcomes associated with spirituality range from a sense of meaning in life (Graber, 2001) to interpersonal connectedness (Bellingham et al., 1989). Moreover, the notion of spiritual development, and the potential attainment of goal states such as ‘enlightenment,’ although conceptually opaque and poorly understood in a Western

psychological context, are frequently positioned within religious/spiritual literature as the most important and valuable endeavour a person can engage in (Sangharakshita, 2003). As such, if people learning (sati) mindfulness are minded to cultivate a sense of spirituality through their practice, this is to be welcome and perhaps even assisted (in a clinical/therapeutic sense), as addressed below.

However, there are caveats to this last sentence. For a start, the 'if' is important: many people are drawn to mindfulness in a secular way, and potentially find the notion of spirituality uncomfortable or at least unfamiliar (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). For instance, studying meditators in London, Lomas et al. (2013) found that many only initially took up mindfulness as a stress-management technique; some were then perturbed to find it presented as including spiritual ideas and practices, and a few consequently disengaged from it as a result. As such, in whatever forum mindfulness is taught – from clinical/therapeutic settings to community groups – the notion of spirituality must be handled sensitively, with respect given to the divergent personal and cultural views people may hold regarding this (Gonsiorek et al., 2009).

Then, even if people are minded to embark upon a journey of spiritual development, however conceived, they would well be advised to tread carefully upon this. Although the notion of spiritual development may be ostensibly appealing, it may yet be very challenging. For instance, while spiritual 'death' and 'rebirth' may ultimately be liberating processes, they involve radically challenging one's sense of self, which can be a difficult process to navigate, especially if people lack appropriate guidance (Lomas et al., 2015). Indeed, a study by Shapiro (1992) of long-term *Vipassana* meditators (who might reasonably be regarded as being on a 'spiritual path') found that 62% had experienced psychological problems relating to their practice (e.g., depression and anxiety), with 7% describing more profound issues (e.g., depersonalization). Similarly, Lustyk et al. (2009) reviewed mental health problems connected to meditation, and identified 17 relevant primary publications, the majority of which were case studies of problems like psychosis occurring after intensive retreats. For this reason, meditation has tended to be contraindicated for particular clinical groups, such as those with a history of schizophrenia (Dobkin et al., 2012) (although exceptions to this are emerging; e.g., Chadwick et al., 2005). It should be emphasised that most original Buddhist literature explicitly acknowledges that spiritual development is likely to be challenging, with incumbent psychological risks (Engler, 2003). Indeed, these teachings are designed to address and guide seekers through such challenges, while part of the role of *sanghas* (religious communities) is to likewise help contextualise and support practitioners through such challenges. As such, the idea of spiritual development must be handled sensitively in a clinical or therapeutic context, as elucidated in the final section.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that current conceptualisations and utilisations of mindfulness in the West, such as clinical/therapeutic mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), tend to focus mainly on *sati*-type mindfulness. However, as valuable as such interventions are, it has been suggested the West may benefit from engaging with the ethical and spiritual dimensions of mindfulness found in the 'original' Buddhist teachings (recognising that Buddhism comprises diverse schools of thought). Indeed, Van Gordon et al. (2015b) have suggested that we are beginning to see the emergence of 'second generation' MBIs, which do explore the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Buddhism. A pioneering early example of such exploration is perhaps Linehan's (1993) Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which has successfully integrated cognitive-behavioural strategies with Zen Buddhist principles and mindfulness practice in the treatment of borderline personality disorder (Robins, 2002). So, in the interest of contributing towards this second generation of MBIs, this paper finishes with some observations based on the discussion above, dealing in turn with the idea of bringing an ethical and spiritual dimension to MBIs.

First, introducing an ethical dimension to MBIs would be potentially very worthwhile. Most MBIs – founded as they are on the concept of *sati* – generally do not involve any explicit ethical considerations. If participants are experiencing negative thoughts or feelings, they are encouraged to attend to these and to decentre from them. This is an effective mental response of course, hence the positive impact such interventions have upon wellbeing (Ma & Teasdale, 2004). However, what these interventions do *not* do is make causal links between such negative qualia and people's actions outside the meditation session. This is an unfortunate omission, since from a Buddhist perspective, a prophylactic solution to distress would be to help people learn to live skilfully (i.e., ethically), thus lessening the likelihood of these negative qualia emerging in the first place. As such, it could be argued that such interventions would be even more powerful if, in addition to teaching *sati*-mindfulness of the present moment, they also encouraged *appamada*-mindfulness of the ethical dimension of one's actions.

So, what would introducing *appamada* look like in practice? There are already meditation-based interventions promoting prosocial qualities such as loving-kindness (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Moreover, most MBIs encourage practitioners to imbue their awareness with positive attitudinal qualities like compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Indeed, Baer (2015) argues that the promotion of such qualities means that first generation MBIs are already helping to inculcate beneficial ethical values. However, there is arguably room for a more systematic empirical and theoretical enquiry into the value of acting ethically, and for efforts to explicitly promote ethical awareness and action in the context of MBIs. For a start, this could involve integrating an ethical element into existing MBIs (e.g., MBSR). For instance, participants' attention could be drawn to the way that actions and events in

their lives tend to affect the kinds of experiences they have in meditation. This could then be the platform for introducing a segment into one of the sessions, in which the notion of 'skilful' behaviour is introduced, together with the idea of following an ethical framework (as a guide to skilfulness). Here, the five Buddhist precepts could be highlighted as an example of such a framework, although it might be emphasised that one would not need to be a Buddhist to follow these. Participants could then unobtrusively be invited to engage with the precepts, and to explore the impact that doing so had upon their meditation practice and overall wellbeing.

There is also the possibility of developing new MBIs specifically focused on ethics. For instance, the author is currently developing an eight-week intervention, modelled on MBSR, entitled *Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living*: the first session introduces mindfulness; the second session presents the five precepts, and explains their relevance to wellbeing; the next five sessions focus on each of the precepts in turn (one per week); and the final session draws all the strands together. Each session includes mindfulness practice, including reflection on ethics themselves, and as per MBSR, participants are also encouraged to undertake homework exercises (e.g., being mindful of their behaviour in relation to the precept focused on that week). Here it is also emphasised that one does not have to be Buddhist or spiritual to participate; participants are simply invited to explore the impact that following the precepts has upon wellbeing. It is also important to avoid any implication of judgement and guilt, which can be very unhelpful in a therapeutic context (Brazier, 2009); the point is not to chastise people for acting 'unskilfully,' but simply to encourage them to notice any positive effects when they do manage to act well.

The idea of introducing a spiritual dimension to MBIs is potentially more problematic. As discussed above, spirituality can be a contentious notion for some people (Lomas et al., 2013), and one should be wary about foisting it upon people in the context of secularised MBIs such as MBSR. Alternatively, participants may already be on a different spiritual path, and may likewise resent efforts to 'convert' them to Buddhism; indeed, the Dalai Lama has suggested it is preferable for people to stay with the religious tradition in which they are raised than to 'switch' paths (Batchelor, 1999). That said, it may still be appropriate in secular MBIs to gently mention that mindfulness is based upon a rich tradition of Buddhist spiritual practice, and to provide interested participants with information regarding resources (e.g., local Buddhist groups) that they can engage with if curious. For instance, while Lomas et al. (2013) found that many meditators had only taken up the practice initially as a means of stress reduction (e.g., through an MBSR course), a majority of these had subsequently become interested in exploring the wider Buddhist context of meditation, and had since embarked upon a spiritual path (Lomas et al., 2014).

In terms of more in-depth journeys of spiritual development, this is arguably not the kind of process that can be supported by time-limited clinical/therapeutic interventions, but requires either a long-term psychotherapeutic relationship (Miller, 1999), or involvement with an established spiritual tradition and community (Engler, 2003). It is perhaps only in such contexts that the type of psychological challenges mentioned above can be contextualised, supported, and safely worked through. This of course is not an argument against imbuing mindfulness with a spiritual dimension – far from it – but simply a recognition that any such journey is often complicated and hard, and usually requires the kind of on-going guidance and nurturance that only skilled therapists and/or established spiritual communities can provide.

Summary

This paper has suggested that mindfulness in the West, particularly in academic and clinical settings, has largely become de-contextualised from its Buddhist origins. This has meant that mindfulness has to an extent been denuded of its power as a means of psychospiritual development. Thus, the paper has argued for the value of re-contextualising mindfulness, and has offered one such way of doing so. Drawing on *Theravada* Buddhism, it proposed that Buddhism identifies *three* main ‘forms’ of mindfulness: *sati* (awareness of the present moment), *appamada* (awareness suffused with ethical care), and *sampajañña* (awareness suffused with a sense of spiritual development). Currently, only *sati* has really been recognised in the West. However, we have much to gain from also recognising the potential ethical and spiritual dimensions of mindfulness, and from encouraging *appamada* and *sampajañña* mindfulness. Recommendations were made for how to foster ethical awareness in clinical/therapeutic practice. However, introducing spiritual awareness is potentially more problematic, and is perhaps only appropriate in the context of long-term therapeutic relationships or established spiritual communities.

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