

Are we forgetting *sati*? Memory and the benefits of mindfulness from a non-Buddhist viewpoint.

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A recent article in the Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies (Levman, 2017) that advocated ‘putting remembrance back into mindfulness’ spawned an exchange of comments (Anālayo, 2018a,b,c; Levman, 2018a,b; Rapgay, 2018) that discussed in depth what may have been the precise meaning of the Pali word *sati* in the traditional Buddhist texts. I found this discussion highly interesting in the contexts of history and religion, but in one respect also quite disconcerting: Prof. Levman claimed that this discussion about the word *sati*

has implications not just for Buddhist practitioners, but also for the modern mindfulness movement, for mindfulness divorced from memory and wisdom is mindfulness divorced from the teachings, and will *accordingly* have only limited benefit.’ (Levman, 2018b, p. 1985), (emphasis added)

without specifying which benefits he has in mind, for whom this is supposed to apply, or why this should be the case. Assertions like this, or the following one: ‘Since *sati* is such an important subject today, both for Buddhist meditation practice and its secular applications, the discourse on what it actually means takes on a pressing relevance’ (Levman, 2018a, p. 1043), which come without any restrictions or qualifications and thus are implicitly claimed to apply also to non-Buddhists and/or when considering outcomes of interest to non-Buddhists, suggest a fundamental confusion:

To non-Buddhists (a qualified majority of the world’s population!) at least, it is not that mindfulness is beneficial to the extent that it coincides with *sati* (whatever the exact meaning of this word may have been millennia ago), but conversely: *sati* is an important topic to the extent to which it overlaps with the aspects that cause the proven beneficial effects of mindfulness (as defined for example implicitly through measures like MAAS, FFMQ, ...)’.ⁱ

In other words, rather than the ‘vast majority of authors just assume that *sati* = mindfulness = present moment awareness, which is an assumption yet to be proven’ (Levman, 2018a, p. 1043), there are actually three assumptions here that would need proof:

- 1) what is beneficial about mindfulness is (only) present moment awareness,
- 2) what is beneficial about mindfulness necessarily involves ‘recollecting the Buddha’s teaching’, and
- 3) “recollecting the Buddha’s teaching ...” = *sati*.

ad 1: As far as I can see this is not generally claimed (among those applying mindfulness; it might be in the general population), this seems to be clear for example from the widespread use of multifaceted measures of mindfulness like the FFMQ (self-ref.1 anonymized).

ad 2&3: Prof. Levman and Rev. Anālayo discuss 3) in depth, while taking 2) for granted. But for us who acknowledge the wisdom and/or usefulness of a considerable number of parts of Buddhist traditions without being Buddhists ourselves, 2) is the crucial issue. One problem is: What exactly is ‘the Buddha’s teaching’?ⁱⁱ At one point Prof. Levman seemed to restrict to the *tilakkhaṇa* (Levman, 2018b, p. 1983), while in Levman (2017, p. 127) he seemed to imply that calling to mind and not forgetting the foundations of mindfulness, five powers, limbs of enlightenment, eightfold path, etc. are to be included; this is then extended to remembering former births (ibid), recalling former lives with their characteristics and details (p.128), and so on. At least this last parts seem

highly problematic for non-Buddhists (and presumably for non-dogmatic contemporary Buddhists as well), given what the Pali Canon asserts to be the contents of such recollections:

Can't I be mindful unless I 'recall' 84000 kings that supposedly in succession reigned 84000 years each (MN83. Note: this is impossible given the age of the human race, or even the earth)? Do I have to 'recall' roasting in a Great Hell for many a millennium (MN50)? 'Recall' participating in a war between the gods and the titans (MN37)? To be mindful, do I have to fantasize to 'have actually known, seen and discovered by myself' that 'immediately next to the Hell of Excrement is the vast Hell of Hot Embers' etc. etc. (MN130)? Do I have to 'remember' having been received by four devas when being born (DN4)?

Why is mindfulness without such 'memories' supposed to be of 'limited benefit'? The claim that mindfulness based interventions are deficient without recollecting such teachings seems to me about as plausible as claiming that astronomy is of limited benefit unless we remember the sun's relationship with Helios (or Amaterasu, or Ra, or whoever else your favourite sun god may be). Alternatively, if it is claimed these are not part of the Buddha's teaching, what exactly is? For example, can a Zen-practitioner be mindful in the sense of *sati*, or is *shikantaza* of limited benefit? What about someone on the way to become a *paccekabuddha* (who presumably can not recollect the Buddha's teaching because if he heard it at all it must have been in a previous life, which not yet being enlightened he can't recall)? What about those who subscribe to teachings that are very close but not identical to those of the Buddha? (Daoists may provide examples if their teachings were indeed so similar that "[i]n the eyes of the Han Chinese, Buddhism was but another aspect of Taoism, since its practices and tenets were akin to those of the Taoists." (Chen, 1964, p. 50) and that they even believed the Buddha may have been none other than *LaoZi* himself who went to India after having left China.)

Non-Buddhist participants in discussions about the relationship of mindfulness and Buddhism tend to politely gloss over the massive dose of idiosyncratic fantasies like the ones quoted above (flights of fancy that may or may not have seemed reasonable millennia ago, but look highly implausible in the light of today's knowledge) in the Buddhist canonical texts, stories that dogmatic Buddhists still seem to cling to with the result that 'Buddhism, insofar as it is discussed by Western philosophers, is usually depicted as an arcane, superstitious, and metaphysically muddled religion or philosophy.' (Flanagan, 2011, p. 117) I doubt that this state of affairs is to the long term benefit of Buddhism and Buddhists (but this is of course for them to decide); more importantly, being seen as aligned to an arcane and superstitious religion is also to the detriment of mindfulness based interventions and therefore to those who otherwise might benefit from these interventions (there have already been calls for health warnings being attached to MBIs because of their alleged metaphysical loadedness, ironically in an article entitled "Forgetting ourselves" (Ratnayake & Merry, 2018) - there is a critical online comment Mattes (2018), but note that this comment is not applicable to the present discussion).

After all these critical comments now for some good news: First, despite what is sometimes claimed, it is not at all clear that the cosmology and soteriology of ancient India are inseparable and indispensable parts of the original teachings of the Buddha, as can be seen (self-ref.2 anonymized) by combining the principle of 'uniformitarianism' (Levman, 2018b, p. 1984) with the observation that at least some supernatural elements were added later to the written canonical texts (Anālayo, 2013, p. 19). Conversely, contemporary science is by no means oblivious to ultimate concerns (Emmons, 1999) and the possible deep benefits of engaging with wisdom traditions like Buddhism, Daoism, and others (self-ref.3 anonymized).

The second good news is that the claim according to which mindfulness without recollecting the Buddha's teaching is of limited benefit (on outcome measures that are – or should be? – of interest also to non-Buddhists) seems empirically testable. Some ways through which this question might be approached include: Do secular mindfulness interventions engender better outcomes among Buddhists than among non-Buddhists? Are outcomes in Buddhist countries better than in

non-Buddhist countries? Do they correlate with test results on knowledge of Buddhist doctrine (including / excluding outdated cosmology)? With behavioural measures of adherence to distinctively Buddhist (compared to other religious) teachings? Are interventions employing ‘greater fidelity to Buddhist principles and practices [...] more efficacious in symptom relief or move beyond symptom relief to address the underlying root causes of suffering.’ (Lindahl, 2015, p. 58)?

Interestingly, even though there are publications comparing correlates of mindfulness and of mindfulness facets in different cultures (e.g., Raphiphatthana, Jose and Chobthamkit (2019)), I could not find work comparing interventions along the lines suggested above. This is rather unfortunate since according to the canonical texts the Buddha himself famously advised the Kālāmas, who were ‘perplexed and in doubt [...] as which of these good ascetics speak truth and which speak falsehood,’ that to find out, they better

do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: ‘The ascetic is our guru.’ (AN 3.65)ⁱⁱⁱ

Even more to the point, as already noted above, many assertions in the canonical texts look highly suspicious in light of today’s knowledge. To mention just two more examples (see also self-ref.4 anonymized): The list of causes of great earthquakes omits plate tectonics but includes wind stirring up the waters on which the earth supposedly rests (DN 16), and belief in wrong Dhamma is claimed to interfere with rainfall leading to India being depopulated (AN 3.56). Clearly, there is a lot in the classical texts that merits suspicion, and AN 3.135 strongly advises to investigate and scrutinize matters that merit suspicion - an investigation that by the above can not be restricted to quoting scriptures, teachers and traditions. Unfortunately, in practice the latter is what is usually being done^{iv} (at least outside the empirical sciences), as the Buddha may have been well aware of: ‘those beings are few who examine the meaning of the teachings’ (AN 1.341).

As long as the alleged importance of *sati* is based on claims of benefits of an undisclosed nature^v, with these claims themselves apparently based on tradition and scriptures rather than ‘knowing ourselves’ through careful empirical investigation, we might as well enjoy the philological acumen displayed in the guesswork about what it may have meant millennia ago, but otherwise forget about *sati*.

Abbreviations

AN + book.sutta number: *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, translated by Bodhi (2012).

DN + sutta number: *Dīgha Nikāya*, translated by Walshe (1995).

MN + sutta number: *Majjhima Nikāya*, translated by Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995).

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- i Which in turn imply somewhat different notions of mindfulness, so it might be worthwhile distinguishing between different ‘mindfulnesses’ like mindfulness^{FFMQ} etc., and maybe also mindfulness^{sati}, in parallel with Flanagan (2011, p. 112) who distinguished between concepts of eudaimonia as eudaimonia^{Buddha}, eudaimonia^{Aristotle} and eudaimonia^{Hedonist}.
- ii As Compson and Monteiro (2016, p. 557) put it: Who decides what authentically Buddhist means, and what would be the criteria for such authenticity?
- iii This sutta approvingly mentions taking into account ‘the views of the wise’ among other things, as emphasized by Thanissaro (Compson & Monteiro, 2016, p. 563). This seems a bit odd given that the problem of the Kālāmas appears to be that they are confused about who among those claiming to be wise are to be trusted and who not. Also, over the millennia since the time of the Buddha, we have learned that evidence-based decisions are preferable to ‘eminence-based’ ones (Isaacs & Fitzgerald, 1999), because in many cases expertise is neither easy to recognize nor particularly reliable (see e.g. Tetlock (2005)). Similarly, introspection is unreliable even among trained psychologists (Schwitzgebel, 2011) and meditators (Verhaeghen, 2017, p. 31).
- iv Occasionally supplemented by naively accepted ‘experiences’ like the already-quoted ‘hav[ing] actually known, seen and discovered by myself [...] immediately next to the Hell of Excrement is the vast Hell of Hot Embers,’ or ‘seeing’ subatomic particles and crystal bodies, etc.
- v but presumably mainly Buddhist-religious, like liberation from a supposed eternal circle of rebirths that is allegedly problematic because it is believed that massive suffering results from the fact that aggregates (*saṅkhārā*) tend to be impermanent (*aniccā*) and hence unsatisfactory (*dukkhā*).