

Secularization of Mindfulness: Downfalls and Successes of Cross-Cultural Transmission

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ABSTRACT

The mindfulness movement has seen a great deal of secularization in its transition from Eastern to Western society. Whether something has been “lost” in the secularization of meditation traditions originally beholden to Buddhism is of great interest to the scholar of religions and the scholar of dichotomous Eastern/Western thinking, alike. In this work, the author parsed the effects of secularization on mindfulness and meditation through revisiting the original, doctrinal Buddhist definition of mindfulness and comparing this to the mindfulness of the modern West. The differences between these practices have given rise to misunderstandings of the purpose of Buddhist mindfulness, meant to be a catalyst for enlightenment and liberation from the self, but often misinterpreted as a means of self-improvement which further attaches one to oneself. The argument can be made, however, that any motivation that brings people to mindfulness can result in a more present, aware, and connected society.

Key words: mindfulness, secularization, Buddhism, meditation, West, MBSR, enlightenment

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INTRODUCTION

The spread of mindfulness to the West has seen a marked transition from its origins in Buddhist practice and philosophy to its secularized, fashionable form popular by the dawn of the second millennium of the common era. The question must be asked whether the American “mindfulness movement” accurately reflects the true purpose of mindfulness in the Buddhist context. Secularizing a religious tradition inherently entails a change in the basic framework through which the practice is understood. The issue of the mistranslation of mindfulness between cultures poses a concern for the intentions underlying individual practice. These misunderstandings could lead to a distortion of the practice that may be irrevocable in the West, especially regarding the goal of self-improvement, a tenet often central to Western mindfulness that is by and large counterproductive to the no-self-focused mindfulness of Buddhism. On the other hand, the potential for spreading the benefits of mindfulness to a wider audience may yield incredibly fruitful results, especially in psychotherapeutic, educational, and social change-driven contexts. While the “mindfulness movement” has taken on a secular, individualistic bend in Western culture that has often resulted in gross misinterpretations of the basic purpose of Buddhist mindfulness practice — to alleviate suffering and catalyze awakening — these original goals remain intact in variable contexts due to the function of mindfulness as a

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quasi-religious framework through which practitioners with myriad motivations all may gain a greater understanding of reality and the way to liberation. Through defining mindfulness, parsing the extraction of mindfulness from a Buddhist context, scrutinizing ideological mistranslations, and analyzing Buddhist reactions to the American mindfulness movement, the present paper will examine the mutual effects of mindfulness on the West, downfalls and triumphs of these effects, and the implications these may hold for the functions of Buddhism and mindfulness in the Western hemisphere.

BUDDHIST FOUNDATIONS

Buddhism arrived in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 2,300 years after the birth of the tradition in India. The religion did not gain popularity until after the second World War, when propagator D.T. Suzuki galvanized the “Zen boom” of the 1950s.² Following the spread of Zen Buddhism, a primarily East Asian religion stemming from China, Korea, and Japan, an influx of Southeast Asian immigrants brought Theravāda Buddhism to America in the 1970s through 1990s. The new Southeast and South Asian immigrants vastly outnumbered extant Asian American communities and thus “altered the shape of Buddhism in America” to be weighted more heavily in a Theravādan direction.³ The constitution of Buddhist sects in America has been in flux since the advent of the religion in the West. Many ideas beholden to Buddhism, however, have become extracted from the Buddhist framework to adapt to a Western audience. Mindfulness, specifically, has become a tag-word in America that seems to appear everywhere, from magazine covers boasting the “mindfulness movement” to self-help seminars to psychotherapy. The concept of mindfulness in the

² Peter Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 236.

³ Gregory, 235.

West has stayed true to some aspects of the Buddhist tenet of “Right Mindfulness,” but in many ways the process of cross-cultural translation has skewed the meaning of the term. It is of paramount importance that practitioners of mindfulness understand the original definition of the term, as well as its framework in the context of Buddhism, to truly adopt mindfulness as a means through which to alleviate suffering and realize the fullness of the present moment.

Mindfulness has held a central role in the Buddhist philosophical paradigm since the compilation of the Pāli Theravāda Canon around the turn of the common era. The *Satipatṭhāna Sutta*, translated as the “*Scripture on the Foundations of Mindfulness*,” elucidates the nuances of mindfulness, both as a concept and as a practice in Buddhism. The sutta defines mindfulness as both attending to present moment experiences and the ability to do so through recalling the Buddha’s teachings.⁴ This twofold character of present moment awareness and remembering what the Buddha taught shapes mindfulness as a “boundless” facilitator of memory and of direct moment-to-moment experience.⁵ As monk Bhikkhu Anālayo writes in his rendering of the Sutta, “Direct experience constitutes the central epistemological tool in early Buddhism... it is in particular the practice of *satipatṭhāna* that can lead to an undistorted direct experience of things as they truly are.”⁶ This direct momentary awareness holds critical importance in the overall framework of Buddhist practice. Seeing clearly the reality of the world as it is represents a core constituent of attaining enlightenment, the paramount goal of Buddhism. The reference to direct awareness as the early Buddhist “central epistemological tool” lends to the absolute importance of mindfulness in the religion, stemming back to the earliest times of Buddhism on earth.

⁴ Anālayo, *Satipatṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2010), 46-49.

⁵ Anālayo, *Satipatṭhāna*, 49.

⁶ Anālayo, *Satipatṭhāna*, 46.

The term *sati*, typically rendered as “mindfulness,” can be seen as a means through which practitioners aim to attain enlightenment through presence and active engagement of memory. The Pāli word *sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*) was first translated as “mindfulness” by scholar T. W. Rhys Davids, a rendering that may lack a sufficient stress on components of memory and recollection but that does allude to the necessity of an active mind in full awareness of the present moment.⁷ Theravādan Monk Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *sati* or mindfulness as “lucid awareness,” which he believes “provides the connection between its two primary canonical meanings: as memory and as lucid awareness of present happenings.”⁸ Regardless of whether the term is rendered as mindfulness, lucid awareness, or an expression that further stresses the critical component of memory, *sati* represents a basis of Buddhist practice in myriad respects. In his discourse on the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, Bhikkhu Anālayo explains:

Sati not only forms part of the noble eightfold path — as right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) — but also occupies a central position among the faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*), and constitutes the first member of the awakening factors (*bojjhaṅgā*). In these contexts, the functions of *sati* cover both present moment awareness and memory.⁹

The amalgam of roles *sati* plays in the Buddhist framework, as presented by Anālayo, conveys the tremendous significance of mindfulness in Buddhism from the advent of its Pāli canon over 2,000 years ago. As a connecting factor between the eight facets of the Noble Eightfold Path, as a physical and sensory basis of ability, and as the fundamental base of the cultivation of enlightenment, mindfulness epitomizes the purpose of Buddhist practice and thus the means through which one may attain *nibbāna*, liberation.

⁷ Rupert Gettin, "On Some Definitions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 263.

⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (June 2011): 23.

⁹ Anālayo, *Satipatthāna*, 49.

Mindfulness in a Buddhist context espouses the purposes of alleviating suffering and catalyzing awakening, with an emphasis on overcoming separation between the relative, individual self and the ultimate, undifferentiated self in order to see clearly and achieve enlightenment. Buddhist mindfulness is thus meant to deconstruct notions of “self,” to see the realities of no-self, interconnectedness, and all-pervasive *nibbāna*. The extraction of mindfulness from the Buddhist framework has seen the mistranslation of the original, intended purpose of *sati*, especially in the secular West. New mindfulness-based therapies developed in the West, such as MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) and MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy), aim to improve quality of life on a *relative-self* level. According to Doctor Lobsang Rapgay, these therapies are meant not to help one escape *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, but to help one become more *comfortable* in it.¹⁰ This is entirely contrary to the Buddhist goal of mindfulness, which necessitates the release of clinging to relative-self and *saṃsāra* so that the practitioner may achieve awakening. The following paragraphs will parse the downfalls and potential benefits of transmitting mindfulness to a secular culture, investigating whether the original purpose has become warped beyond repair or whether it may remain intact through the quasi-religious framework mindfulness has come to adopt in the West.

WESTERN MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness without the conceptual context of Buddhism has taken on some divergent characteristics, especially regarding use in Western psychotherapies and secular education. In the absence of the trappings of a foreign religion, Westerners were able to accept mindfulness into their extant philosophies. The popularity of the practice boomed at the turn of

¹⁰ Lobsang Rapgay, Ph.D., "The Clinical Application of Modern Mindfulness" (lecture, Buddhist Meditation Traditions, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, February 21, 2018).

the twenty- first century. In modern Western society, the primary route of transmission of mindfulness has taken on a markedly secular tone.

Journalist Linda Heuman writes:

The main delivery system for Buddhist meditation in the modern West isn't Buddhism; it is science, medicine, and schools. There is a tidal wave behind this movement. MBSR practitioners already account for the majority of new meditators and soon they are going to be the vast majority.¹¹

The “McMindfulness” movement, as Heuman refers to this contemporary secularization phenomenon, has permeated Western culture through widely trusted settings such as education, medicine, and research. These guises have allowed mindfulness to enter the conversation to listeners with open minds, which has led to the widespread popularity of the practice today. Whether the cross-cultural translation was an accurate one, however, remains in question. In absence of its original framework — the religion of Buddhism — mindfulness has had to take on definitive characteristics of its own in the West. Some may argue that mindfulness, in fact, has its own conceptual framework that has permeated the West along with the spread of the practice.

Mindfulness, even when extracted from Buddhist terms, entails its own contextual backing and approach to practice and philosophy, one emphasizing present moment experiences and the alleviating of suffering without necessity for a “buddha.” This framework has been conducive to a wider American audience, where the practice could blend with whatever spiritual or secular traditions the population already espoused. Author Jeff Wilson claims that if the practice is benefiting people, it is not a problem that myriad motivations bring people to mindfulness. He writes:

Mindfulness can be used to provide an order to life that stabilizes, manages, labels, and assigns meaning to all possible activities and situations. Mindfulness is connected to a whole set of self-disciplinary lifestyle practices that are given moral weight by their

¹¹ Linda Heuman, "Meditation Nation," *Tricycle*, June 27, 2014, 8.

promoters. Even if we accept the protestations of many advocates that mindfulness is not a religion per se, it is nonetheless doing the work of religions.¹²

Wilson points out that mindfulness is not necessarily stripped of its framework in the transition from Buddhism to the West; in fact, it carries its own philosophical background that champions the original objectives of Buddhist meditation through the myriad purposes mindfulness has adopted in the Western world. Namely, according to Wilson, the abilities to “alleviate suffering,” “illuminate the truths of life,” and provide “salvific improvement on the individual, national, and planetary levels” make mindfulness a universal healer, regardless of religious labels.¹³ Although Western mindfulness has been changed substantially from the mindfulness of Buddhism, the common purpose of the alleviation of suffering enables the practice to maintain an underlying salvific similarity. Even though the Western practitioner may be drawn to the practice for self-improvement, Wilson argues, mindfulness has the power to transform perhaps “selfish” motivations to be of benefit to the greater good. The value distinction between the collectivistic nature of Buddhism and the individualistic culture of the West, then, may not hinder the effectiveness of mindfulness as a helping, healing agent. In Western therapeutic contexts, this possibility for transcultural benefit has seen the chance to blossom.

Mindfulness-based psychotherapies originated in the United States in the 1980s and have experienced profound popularity in the West in the following decades. In 1979, American professor Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).¹⁴ Although adapted from Buddhist mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn extracted his curriculum from a Buddhist framework and instead bolstered the scientific applications of

¹² Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 161.

¹³ Wilson, *Mindful America*, 161.

¹⁴ Rappagay, "The Clinical."

the program. Author Rupert Gethin writes, "In [MBSR], the Buddhist origins of mindfulness, although not exactly a secret, are often underplayed or even not mentioned at all."¹⁵ This secularized characteristic of MBSR has given rise to a rapid acclimation and acceptance of the therapy in the United States. With religious trappings, however, a medical application of a foreign, spiritually-based practice would likely be disregarded in Western society. Gethin goes on, "The approach is practical and what is emphasised is the therapeutic usefulness of mindfulness rather than its Buddhist credentials, although these are sometimes alluded to."¹⁶ The terms Gethin highlights here — practical, therapeutic, and usefulness — play a central role in why mindfulness-based psychotherapies have enjoyed so much success in the United States. Even the minimal mention of Buddhism in MBSR is used to provide further "credentials" for the benefits of the practice, to ensure the practitioner that the therapy holds high efficacy. Through downplaying the religious origins of MBSR and capitalizing on scientific psychotherapeutic outcomes, Kabat-Zinn brought a beneficial therapy to the West, where mindfulness under the guise of Buddhism may not have so readily been accepted.

Following the advent of MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), a combination of MBSR and extant Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), arose in the last decade of the twentieth century. This therapeutic technique combines cognitive-behavioral approaches, which focus on reappraising maladaptive thought patterns to reduce recurrence of major depressive or negative emotional episodes, and mindfulness practices to effectively reduce rumination and attachment to thoughts.¹⁷ This therapy has provided great benefit to many patients, but it must be

¹⁵ Gethin, "On Some," 268.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marloes J. Huijbers et al., "Preventing Relapse in Recurrent Depression using Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Antidepressant Medication Or the Combination: Trial Design and Protocol of the MOMENT Study," *BMC Psychiatry* 12 (August 27, 2012): 125.

questioned whether the application of Buddhist mindfulness to secular therapies has at all honored the original purpose of Buddhist meditation: the alleviation of suffering and achievement of *nibbāna*. The former goal, relief of suffering, has certainly been of central importance to MBSR and MBCT. Patients who undergo these psychotherapies have generally reported significant positive effects of mindfulness as experienced in the context of their treatments, especially for mental health-related outcomes. The latter goal, the release from attachment to the cycle of birth and death, has not so clearly been accomplished by mindfulness-based therapies; in fact, the reality may weigh heavily to the contrary.

MBSR and MBCT have experienced substantial success in the Western world, but the ways in which these therapies differ from the mindfulness of Buddhism may be of concern to the general perception of mindfulness in the West. While liberation from *saṃsāra* constitutes the goal of Buddhist mindfulness, MBSR and MBCT encourage practitioners to use mindfulness as a means of improving oneself on a relative, individual level. The idea of mindfulness in these psychotherapies relies on bettering one's *saṃsāra* rather than realizing *nibbāna*; in other words, Buddhist mindfulness with the goal of *nibbāna* frees the practitioner of the bonds of suffering, while psychotherapeutic mindfulness with the goal of self-improvement keeps the practitioner in these bonds, and even makes him more *comfortable* there. Despite this core contrast, MBSR and MBCT are notably consistent with Buddhist mindfulness in that they teach inhibition of distractions so that one may be present with what is. These therapies diverge from Buddhism, however, with the emphasis on non-judgment, a characteristic of Western mindfulness that Buddhist meditation does not embody; the basis on practice rather than on a conceptual framework; and the result in surface learning of the techniques rather than deep learning.¹⁸ Despite these marked differences, mindfulness-based psychotherapies

¹⁸ Rappay, "The Clinical."

have brought mindfulness, and in some cases Buddhism, to a wide audience that may otherwise have not accepted these ideas and practices.

The incorporation of mindfulness-based therapies like MBSR and MBCT into Western psychology may be viewed as “skillful means” (*upāya*) that have adapted Buddhism to a modern, broader, secular audience. Through merely reaching this expansive demographic, mindfulness-based psychotherapies may have brought and may currently bring people to Buddhism by spreading awareness of the tradition in the West. The removal of the religious trappings to create an accessible therapy may have in turn generated an interest in the religion from which mindfulness came, bringing Buddhism to the forefront of American focus. Not everyone would be attracted to traditional Buddhist meditation, but many Westerners are attracted to inner peace and self-improvement.¹⁹ Utilizing mindfulness-based therapies as a skillful means to bring meditation to the Western public, therefore, may actually result in more individuals revisiting the original Buddhist definition of mindfulness so that the fundamental purpose of this practice — relief of suffering through achieving liberation — may still hold a central light in mindfulness practice in America.

MISTRANSLATIONS: FROM BUDDHISM TO SECULAR WEST

The transition of mindfulness practice from Buddhism to the secular West has seen some significant ideological and terminological mistranslations in the recent decades. These misinterpretations, especially those regarding purpose of the practice (non-judgment, focus on the self with no regard to Eightfold Path understanding, and insight into personal neuroses), and application of the practice (to sleep) have altered the shape of mindfulness in the Westernized context. Meditation in the United States now connotes

¹⁹ Ibid.

characteristics that are not beholden to, and are in fact contrary of, much of the meditation taught in Buddhism. These factors continue to increasingly embody mindfulness practice in the West. It is of profound importance that the original Buddhist definition and practices of mindfulness reach the Western audience so that practitioners may see their undertaking in an accurate light, and so that the original goal of liberation from the constructs of separate self may become fundamental to Western mindfulness application.

The purpose of Buddhist meditation is unequivocally related to the alleviation of suffering through following the Noble Eightfold Path, which culminates in the realization of the universal-self and the achievement of liberation. The process of developing one's practice includes an active involvement in one's own thought processes, speech, and actions, which often involves evaluation so that one may act and speak in the most mindful, well-intended manner possible, in accordance with the Eightfold Path. Right Mindfulness, the seventh facet of the Eightfold Path, is said to be a "guarantor of the correct practice of all the other path factors."²⁰ Only with the application of Right Mindfulness can Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, and Right Concentration be exacted fully and correctly. One must judge one's own intentions, speech, actions, and livelihoods to implement the Eightfold Path in its intended purpose. It has only been in a Western context, however, that the character of "non-judgment" has entered the equation. Regarding thoughts with no judgement holds a central role in psychotherapies like MBSR and MBCT, so non-judgment has become an assumed characteristic of mindfulness by many Westerners. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains the "problematic" nature of the misperception of mindfulness as a "type of awareness intrinsically devoid of judgment":

²⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does," 26.

To fulfill its role as an *integral* member of the eightfold path mindfulness has to work in unison with right view and right effort. This means that the practitioner of mindfulness must at times evaluate mental qualities and intended deeds, make judgments about them, and engage in purposeful action.²¹

Bhikkhu Bodhi demonstrates here that, in the context of mindfulness practice, non-judgment actually represents an unskillful trait, one that may enable deluded, mis-intended actions and speech. The practitioner who neglects to evaluate her own words and behaviors will be blind to the ways in which these words and acts may have harmed or may be harming people, including herself, and she will thus be unable to change, or “engage in purposeful action” to correct her actions and views. While non-judgment may be helpful to Western practitioners looking to foster greater acceptance of the extant, individual self, mindfulness practice as delineated by the Eightfold Path frees the practitioner of bonds to this individual self so that one may act out of the greatest good, for relative-self, others, and universal-self. This ideological clash between Buddhist mindfulness and Western mindfulness has resulted in a great misinterpretation of the focus of mindful meditation, namely with regards to whether the focus lies in relative-self- acceptance, or in cultivation of the Eightfold Path to the universal-self and the end of suffering.

In addition to the misattribution of “non-judgment” to mindfulness practice, the mistranslation of “insight” has given rise to further ideological misunderstanding between the West and Buddhism. In Western mindfulness, insight has come to be interpreted as insight into personal neuroses rather than into the three marks of existence, as the term is intended in Buddhist philosophy. Linda Heuman writes, “The term ‘insight,’ instead of being insight into the three characteristics [suffering, impermanence, and non-self], is now insight into ‘my own

²¹ Ibid.

personal patterns of neurosis'... here, 'insight' is being used in a very personal way."²² This personal application of insight on an individual, relative-self level may bring individuals to a better self-understanding, but insight in the traditional Buddhist context is meant to reflect a larger construct. Insight into the three marks of suffering, impermanence, and non-self lead the practitioner to a deeper understanding of reality as it is, and, consequently, into the alleviation of suffering that arises from seeing the truths of existence. In settings such as MBSR and MBCT, the focus on individual self has resulted in the misconception that Buddhist meditation is meant to be a tool of self-improvement, with the aim of making suffering more tolerable rather than eliminating suffering altogether. A greater understanding of the intended meaning of "insight" in the Buddhist context may help to repair the dissonance between the aims of Buddhist and secular mindfulness practice in the West.

Misinterpretations regarding the application of mindfulness practice have even further confused Westerners when attempting to implement mindful meditation into daily life. One such mistranslation revolves around using meditation to promote sleep. In the Buddhist tradition, meditation represents an active, engaged activity, in which one must stay alert and awake to present moment experiences. For many in the West, however, meditation has become a tool for sleep. Heuman writes, "In the buddhadharma, meditation is never used to promote sleep. It is for waking up... [in the modern West], we are using meditation in ways basically the opposite of what Buddhists were using it for."²³ Heuman points out that contemporary Western uses for meditation starkly contrast the intended uses of mindful meditation according to Buddhist beliefs. Ideological misconceptions such as these warp the meaning of mindfulness in the West, even to the point that practitioners are handed

²² Heuman, "Meditation Nation," 7.

²³ Ibid.

the misinterpretation of meditation as an activity for sleep rather than for its intended use: waking up, both figuratively and literally.

The amalgam of misconceptions of Western mindfulness has resulted in variant purposes under which individual practitioners have chosen to undertake learning mindful meditation. The motive of those who come to the practice specifically for individual-self benefit differs significantly from the goal of a practitioner aiming to achieve a “larger social vision,” but, according to Jeff Wilson, either motivating force may result in profound benefits to society. He writes:

From the point of view of the socially engaged mindfulness faction, even relatively self-oriented pursuers of mindfulness will be of benefit to society as they naturally reduce their levels of stress, become more aware of their connections with others, and perhaps back their way into greater alignment with liberal political views, progressive values, and a more ecological outlook.²⁴

Wilson here highlights the basic hope of the Western “market mindfulness” movement: that even self-oriented motivations may bring practitioners to realize greater truths of universal connection. From this viewpoint, any motivation that may bring one to mindfulness may result in great benefit to our world. Perhaps if all practitioners engage in a unified practice, however, where the ideological mistranslations previously discussed are rectified, then this tremendous benefit to society could be exacted. Otherwise, with misinterpretations dominating the Western perception of mindfulness, the practice likely cannot work in the way it has been intended to, in Buddhism, for over 2,000 years.

BUDDHIST REACTIONS

Buddhist reactions to the Western mindfulness movement shed light on whether Wilson’s ideas of universal benefit regardless of initial motivation

²⁴ Wilson, *Mindful America*, 186.

hold water in a Buddhist context. Monk Bhikkhu Bodhi takes the stance that, even if mindfulness takes on secular purposes like stress-reduction, university education or psychotherapy, it is good to use the *Dhamma* (the teachings) as long as it is helping people. He thus agrees with Wilson in the respect that mindfulness works to alleviate suffering and should therefore be utilized in any context in which it can serve that purpose.

Bhikkhu Bodhi writes:

If such practices benefit those who do not accept the full framework of Buddhist teaching, I see no reason to grudge them the right to take what they need. To the contrary, I feel that those who adapt the *Dhamma* to these new purposes are to be admired for their pioneering courage and insight. As long as they act with prudence and a compassionate intent, let them make use of the *Dhamma* in any way they can to help others.²⁵

The opinion Bhikkhu Bodhi advances here parallels Wilson's viewpoint on the issue of secularized mindfulness in many ways. Bodhi speaks highly of individuals who "pioneer" new purposes for the *Dhamma*, characterizing these practitioners as courageous and insightful and claiming that these people should be admired. The cases of Western psychotherapeutic applications and university mindfulness education programs highlight secular means through which the teachings have helped and continue to help people. These can be thought of as great successes of the transmission of mindfulness to the West. Bodhi goes on to caution, "At the same time, I also believe that it is our responsibility, as heirs of the *Dhamma*, to remind such experimenters that they have entered a sanctuary deemed sacred by Buddhists."²⁶ Bodhi does not believe that caution should be thrown to the wind when adopting the *Dhamma* into new contexts; on the contrary, individuals who undertake applying the *Dhamma* to new settings must proceed with great respect, humility, and grace. Those who choose to use the *Dhamma* in new ways have a responsibility to propagate the original definition and purpose, so that mistranslations do not dominate public

²⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, "What Does," 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

perception of the teachings and so that the framework is not lost entirely. In the context of mindfulness, specifically, the ancient wisdom underlying the Buddhist teaching of *sati* has great benefit to bring to practitioners, but misunderstandings of purpose and application hinder the efficacy of modern mindfulness in the West.

Returning to the source of mindful meditation, the Buddhist *Dhamma* or *Buddhadhamma*, may resolve concerning misinterpretations of the practice in the United States, but until this occurs on a wide scale, practitioners of Buddhism take variant stances on the prevalent, Western, secularized mindfulness movement. Many Buddhist individuals hold the perspective that mindfulness has become appropriated and distorted in its secularization, such that it has “lost sight of the Buddhist goal of rooting our greed, hatred, and delusion.”²⁷ This concern certainly nods to the need to return to the *Dhamma* to clarify and essentially redefine the purpose of mindfulness in a Western setting. From another Buddhist practitioner perspective, the “mindfulness movement” can be seen as skillful means, *upāya*, of bringing Buddhism to a vast audience, providing the valence through which individuals may embark on the path to the end of suffering. MBSR and MBCT may be seen as examples of this *upāya* concept, giving students the opportunity to aspire to alleviation of suffering and, perhaps, to liberation. Finally, from a “modernist” Buddhist point of view, Western mindfulness could actually be seen as an effective means of removing “unnecessary historical and cultural baggage” to reveal the useful essence of Buddhist mindfulness practice.²⁸ This last stance may most reflect the perspective of secular Westerners, who do find mindfulness useful when freed of the perhaps hindering trappings of Buddhist culture and history. Unfortunately, extracting the practice from its cultural and conceptual framework isolates mindfulness from its critical original context, enabling

²⁷ Gethin, "On Some," 268.

²⁸ Ibid.

the downfalls caused by the misinterpretations of the practice so prevalent in the West today.

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness, a way of practice and living beholden to Buddhism, has undergone tremendous processes of counter-influence to and from the Western world. The popularity of the “mindfulness movement” has successfully brought mindfulness, and in some cases Buddhism, to Westerners in search of new practices to alleviate suffering and pursue liberation. On the other hand, the West has shaped mindfulness into a secular, psychotherapeutic tool through which students may learn techniques to better themselves or their experiences in this life, a goal contrary to the Buddhist aim of detaching from the individual self to achieve enlightenment. Mistranslations and misinterpretations have led to a new form of mindfulness very different from that of Buddhism. It is of inexpressible importance that these misconceptions be brought to light in the West. The present, widespread misunderstanding of mindfulness is not irrevocable, but action must be taken now to rectify incorrect perceptions and applications of the Buddhist practice that has now become so secularized and decontextualized. Returning to the *Dhamma*, the Buddhist *Satipatthāna Sutta*, and redefining Western mindfulness in terms consistent with its original meaning in the Buddhist context may provide the antidote to the downfalls of secularization. At this point, once recontextualized and correctly understood, the successes of bringing true mindfulness to the West may be experienced in unparalleled, profound abundance.

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