

The Transformations of Mindfulness

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

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1. A Parting of the Ways

I first learned to practice Buddhist meditation in 1967, during my first year at Claremont Graduate School, where I was enrolled in a doctoral program in philosophy. At the beginning of my second term, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam came to study at Claremont and was assigned to the same residence hall where I was living. I had become interested in Buddhism a year or two earlier, while I was still in college, and had even tried to meditate on my own, without success. But now that there was a monk living on the floor just below, I called on him to learn more about Buddhism and was soon practicing meditation under his guidance. He initially instructed me in meditation on the breath, and from there he led me on to the observation of thoughts and feelings. During this early stage of my practice, I did not know of a precise word to describe the process I was learning. I could see that an interesting psychological phenomenon was at play, a kind of “bending back” of awareness upon its own contents. But lacking the word, I thought of it simply as “meditation.”

Several months after I began to meditate I came across a book titled *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, published by Rider in London. The author’s name was given as Nyanaponika Thera, but the book did not provide a biographical note about the author. Since the introduction was signed “Nyanaponika Thera, Forest Hermitage, Kandy, Ceylon,” I assumed the author was a monk from Ceylon, as the country was then known before 1972, when it changed its name to Sri Lanka. Only years later did I learn the author was originally a Jew from Germany who had left his native land in the early years of the Nazi regime, intent on entering the Buddhist order in Ceylon. Through the strange workings of fate, some fifteen years later, I came to live with him at the same Forest Hermitage in Kandy, where I attended on him until his death in 1994.

It was this book that put a name on the method I had learned from my Vietnamese teacher. The word was “mindfulness,” which Nyanaponika singled out as the key to the practice of Buddhist meditation. He described “the way of mindfulness”—not mindfulness itself but “the way of mindfulness,” a broader concept—as “the heart of Buddhist meditation,” and he explained in some detail the fourfold application of mindfulness to the contemplation of body, feelings, states of mind, and mental phenomena. Having learned the name for the endeavor that I had been engaged with, and having seen that the process of mental cultivation was minutely analyzed by the texts of Early Buddhism, I felt a stronger sense of confidence in the path I had entered.

My Vietnamese teacher at Claremont belonged to the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism, which is often contrasted with the more conservative Theravāda branch that predominates in southern Asia. However, in the decades before he came to the United States, the Buddhist revival in southern Asia had opened cross-cultural contacts between Buddhist traditions, and as a result of this he had come to realize the importance of the Chinese Āgamas and Pāli Nikāyas, the

seminal texts of Early Buddhism, for understanding the Buddha’s original teachings. While he remained firmly committed to the spirit of the Mahāyāna, he took these ancient texts as the foundation for his own understanding and practice and urged me to learn them as well. He also gave me the Three Refuges—refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—and stressed the need to bring faith, understanding, and meditation practice together into harmonious balance. In his view, these three strands of Buddhist spirituality were inextricably interwoven, such that none could be separated from the others without becoming itself enfeebled while weakening the whole to which it belonged.

When I arrived in Sri Lanka and entered the Theravāda monastic order, I found that my ordination teacher, Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya, had a very similar attitude. Though as a scholar, he emphasized doctrinal and linguistic study above strict meditation practice, he was himself a meditator who had practiced both concentration and insight meditation with some degree of facility. He also had deep personal devotion to the Buddha and had written a biography of the Buddha, in the Sinhala language, which was used as the classic textbook on the subject in the Sri Lankan monastic institutes. The same ideas and attitude were shared by the other teachers in Sri Lanka under whom I studied. Some put more emphasis on doctrinal understanding, others on meditation practice, but what they had in common was the conviction that knowledge and practice go together like the left foot and the right foot. And just as both feet rest on the ground, my teachers insisted that both learning and practice should be solidly planted on the ground of reverence for the Three Jewels, upright moral conduct, and an aspiration to achieve the supreme goal set by the Dhamma.¹

After I returned to the United States for a five-year stay (1977–82), I began to hear about other Westerners—both Americans and Europeans—who had trained in Asia around the same time I was living in Sri Lanka. Some had been bhikkhus but had since disrobed, while others had trained as lay meditators. Now, back in the West, they were conducting intensive meditation retreats of ten days, a month, and even three months for people who had virtually no prior acquaintance with the Buddha’s teachings. Initially what I heard perplexed me, since this approach differed quite markedly from the guidance I had received from my own teachers, who held that intensive meditation was appropriate for those who have already gone for refuge, established a firm foundation in virtuous conduct, and possessed a clear understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. But, I pondered, perhaps I was taking too conservative a stance. After all, I thought, Buddhism itself has evolved differently in different cultures and eras, and skilled teachers must make use of the *upāya*, expedient means, appropriate for the time in which they live, applying them as they see fit. Perhaps, I thought, in our own era—this *kali yuga* or degenerate age—when we were living in the shadows of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Iran hostage crisis, and the Reagan presidency, a pressure-cooker approach to

¹ I will generally use the Pāli forms of technical Buddhist terms except when I am citing or referring to those who use the Sanskrit forms. Thus I generally use “Dhamma,” but “Dharma” when referring to those who have adopted this form of the word.

meditation was the most effective way to rescue those whose minds were being buffeted by a consumerist culture driven by nothing higher than the pursuit of money and power.

Occasionally, to escape my duties as a resident monk at the Washington Buddhist Vihara, the Sri Lankan temple in D.C. where I lived from 1979 to 1982, I would occasionally attend retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. This gave me the chance to see first hand the adaptations that Buddhism was making as it sent down roots in American soil. While I found the actual meditation instructions to be quite similar to those I had received from my teachers in Sri Lanka, the evening “Dharma talks”—and the other garnishings with which the teachings were embellished—sometimes left me disoriented. Among a myriad of impressions of those times, three stand out in my memory.

One was that the evening talks seldom related the practice of mindfulness meditation we were engaged in during the day to the actual teachings of the Buddha. Exception made of some excellent talks in a more traditional style by Joseph Goldstein, the teachers said virtually nothing about the backdrop to the practice of mindfulness meditation as we find it described in the Pāli Canon, which I had studied in Sri Lanka. There was no talk about our bondage to the beginningless cycle of rebirths; nothing about the role of kamma, understood as the impact of our volitional actions from one life to the next; nothing about the goal of the practice as release from the round of rebirths. All these topics, central to the Dhamma, were simply passed over in silence, or at most treated as metaphors. The Buddha’s discourses were seldom taken up as themes for the evening talks, and if on occasion the Buddha was quoted, it was only by selecting snippets from the suttas, individual lines that would be cited out of context and freely interpreted by the speakers, somewhat in the manner a jazz musician might improvise on a tune by Cole Porter.

This leads into my second recollection, that the talks were extremely eclectic. Not only would the Buddha be quoted infrequently and with little context, but on any evening we might be treated to an assortment of readings from Ramana Maharshi, Krishnamurti, Ram Dass, Lao Tzu, Japanese Zen masters, and Sufi sages. It seemed to me that the teachers did not fully realize the implications of the passages they were citing or the way they differed from the Buddha’s teachings. Numerous times I heard things that even jarred my sensibility, such as: “The Buddha didn’t teach Buddhism; he taught the Dharma.” The implication of this, it seemed, was that all the other sages and saints being quoted were teaching the same thing as the Buddha, and despite the vast diversity in their expressions, what they were all teaching could be reduced to present-moment awareness.

The statement that the Buddha did not teach Buddhism, by the way, is only half true, which means that it is also half false. The Buddha certainly did not teach the historical-cultural-institutional religion that we now know as “Buddhism.” However, in numerous passages he refers to his teaching as “the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata,” thereby indicating that what he teaches is a unique doctrine without a counterpart elsewhere. It is not merely that he expresses the one truth differently, but that he teaches things that are, in principle and not merely in words, incompatible with many of the pivotal ideas of other spiritual systems.

The third thing that I recall from those talks—reconfirmed for me over the years, as I read the books and magazines emerging from the mindfulness movement²—is that the practice itself was undergoing a major overhaul with regard to its objectives and goal. While it may have preserved the same formal elements as had been transmitted in Asia through the centuries—the specific practical instructions on how to set up attention on an object, how to deal with distractions, how to intensify one’s practice, and so forth—I found that the framing of the practice was undergoing some subtle shifts. The new context had led to changes in primary function. In its classical role, as an integral component of the Buddhist path, the purpose of mindfulness meditation is to eradicate the mind’s deep defilements and uproot the belief in a substantial self. This objective is in turn determined by the ultimate goal of the Buddha’s teaching, the attainment of nibbāna, liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

During the years I lived in Washington, I seldom came across references to this goal in the talks I heard at the lay-oriented centers or in the books and magazines emerging from the centers, their teachers, and affiliated groups.³ Rather, it seemed that the purpose in maintaining present-moment awareness, in so far as it was directed toward any goal beyond itself, was to enhance appreciation of the present moment. The actual purpose for which the Buddha taught the way of mindfulness, I learned, was to help us to live in the present, to savor each moment in its immediacy, to ride the ever-changing flow of events with uncluttered minds, letting whatever arises take its course without clinging to anything.

The new wave of meditation teachers recognized, of course, that the practice they were teaching had auxiliary benefits, and these were highlighted in the talks I heard and the conversations that came afterward. The practice could aid self-understanding and self-acceptance. It could disentangle us from the oppressive coils of memories, worries, fears, desires, plans, and pursuits. It could counteract greed and hatred and nurture such qualities as generosity, patience, kindness, and compassion. The practice promoted inner peace, and if only enough people would learn mindfulness, it even had the potential to bring world peace.

It is possible, of course, that these particular points of emphasis were not entirely innovations of the Western pioneers of insight meditation. The pioneers may have picked up just

² I use the expression “mindfulness movement” guardedly and only as a matter of convenience. I do not intend to suggest by this term that there was any concerted effort to propagate mindfulness meditation around the country. Rather, at roughly the same time, different people with different backgrounds were teaching Buddhist meditation as they had learned it in Asia, and the teaching styles were too diverse to constitute anything resembling a movement.

³ In time, two major lines of transmission would emerge, which were quite distinct. One, which stemmed from teachers trained in the Mahasi Sayadaw style of practice, was based at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre. It later spread to California with the establishment of Spirit Rock in the Bay Area. These became the East Coast and West Coast focal points of “Mahasi style” insight meditation. The other, which stemmed from Goenka, had its own centers in the U.S. While Western teachers in the Mahasi system tended to be syncretic, the Goenka lineage did not caucus with followers of other forms of Buddhist meditation, much less with other spiritual traditions, but strictly adhered to Goenka’s teaching, as it still does today.

such an approach from their own Asian teachers, who in the 1960s and early 1970s were already emphasizing the immediate experiential benefits of the practice of mindfulness. And they may have had their own reasons for doing so. They may have taken such a tack as a defensive maneuver, to demonstrate that the Buddha Dhamma, unlike the Christianity being foisted on their countries by the Christian missionaries, was tough, experiential, and realistic. Or they may have thought such a style of exposition was better suited to the minds of skeptical inquirers from the West, who were not yet ready to take on board the whole package of Buddhist doctrine. Or they may have even assumed that their Western students, in taking up Buddhist meditation, had already adopted the classical Buddhist worldview.

As I heard the Dhamma being expounded as a teaching fully applicable to our present life here and now, I found much that I agreed with and thought worthy of respect. What I felt to be missing, however, was the larger framework of the Buddha's teachings as I had encountered them in the suttas. In the classical teaching the cultivation of wholesome qualities is harnessed to the task of realizing the ultimate goal, "the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom" that is won with the utter eradication of all defilements. It is harnessed to breaking the bonds that tie us to the cycle of birth and death. It is harnessed to a transcendent goal that is birthless and deathless. But in the modernist adaptation, it seemed that the practice was no longer integrally tied to the system of Buddhist faith and doctrine that had contained it for some 2500 years. Lifted from its source, the Dhamma had been reduced to the practice of a particular style of meditation, and the meditation itself had been reduced to the technique of present-moment mindfulness just to win purely "immanent" goals such as peace of mind and a more stable grounding in immediate experience.

2. The Division Widens

After five years back in America, I returned to Sri Lanka in 1982, and in the years that followed I continued to read about the development of Buddhism in the U.S. and elsewhere in the West. The trajectory that I could detect from my base in Sri Lanka was one I might well have predicted from my experiences in the early 1980s. I saw mindfulness meditation becoming increasingly psychologized. This was hardly surprising, given that many of the practitioners at the insight meditation retreats were psychologists who took up the practice, not to attain release from saṃsāra, but to gain a deeper, first-person perspective on the human mind, a perspective that would make them more effective in their professional careers. Gradually, some would begin to incorporate the techniques of mindfulness meditation into their therapies, until the boundaries between psychotherapy and contemplative practice would become permeable and new hybrids would appear.

From the realization that mindfulness could be used to help people suffering from chronic illness and unbearable pain, a new system of palliative care took shape, designed by the redoubtable Jon Kabat-Zinn. This system, called "Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction," soon spread to hospitals and treatment centers throughout the U.S. and all over the world. Before long,

MBSR expanded beyond the walls of the medical establishment and metamorphosed into an autonomous practice advocated for people in normal bodily and mental health. It was even championed as a universal Dharma, as *the essential message* of the Buddha and all great spiritual masters, now freed from the baggage of religion including the Buddhist religion itself.

But it did not take long for the next wave of practitioners to realize that this ancient method of mind training had still more potentials waiting to be tapped. Their efforts, spread out across a wide spectrum of disciplines, utterly changed the face of mindfulness. Where the Western pioneers of insight meditation had openly acknowledged the Buddhist roots of mindfulness training, occasionally referred to the Buddha, and even displayed Buddha statues at the meditation centers, and where the next generation had called it a universal Dharma, the new wave of innovators boldly stripped away the remaining tendrils that connected mindfulness to Buddhism and everything else that might have been redolent with the smell of cumin and turmeric. They saw in mindfulness a free-floating variable that could be attached to virtually any human endeavor, somewhat as salt can be added to any dish to enhance its flavor. Mindfulness was even hailed as the flowering of American democracy, the natural culmination of the Declaration of Independence, offering every citizen life, liberty, and the realization (not merely the pursuit) of happiness.

In the early stage of this process, mindfulness was used for purposes that would generally be considered commendable. There was mindfulness for school children to help them concentrate better, mindfulness for pregnant women to keep them calm through their delivery, mindfulness for moms to help them better raise their kids, mindfulness for couples to help resolve the strains in their relationships, mindfulness for addicts to help them break free from addiction, mindful exercise to improve health, and mindful eating to curb harmful food habits. But the process of divestment did not stop there. The trendsetters of culture and commerce soon saw in mindfulness an effective marketing tool that could be used to turn a quick profit. Thus, like rain on a summer afternoon, new applications of mindfulness soon began pouring down on us in an incessant patter. We began to hear about such things as mindful business strategies, mindful shopping, mindful dating, mindful sex, mindful investing, mindful sports, mindful politics, and mindful military training.

One would never have imagined that mindfulness would travel so far from the ancient monasteries where it was first proclaimed as “the direct way for the purification of beings and the realization of nibbāna.” While for some 2500 years it had remained a staid and steady pillar of Buddhist mind training, in record time—in a mere two decades—it had taken on more forms than an Amazonian shapeshifter. And outside the meditation centers, hardly a trace remained of any connection between mindfulness and Buddhism. It seemed that mindfulness had first been born *ex nihilo* in the mind of some twenty-first century genius.

3. Why Did Mindfulness Take This Route?

At this point I want to raise the question why the practice of Buddhist meditation, and in particular the practice of mindfulness, followed the particular trajectory it did in the West. Multiple factors, woven together into a complex tapestry, contributed to this development, including the American spirit of pragmatism, the declining influence of theistic religion, the triumph of the therapeutic, the human potential movement, the quest for authenticity, the reaction against technological impersonality, and crass American commercialism. However, I want to go back to an early stage in the process of transmission and single out one shift that took place as meditation practice moved from East to West. This was a transfer in the “custodianship” of the Dhamma—that is, in teaching authority—from the monastic Sangha to Western lay teachers, from ordained monks to young men and women who had received their training in Asian monasteries and meditation centers without taking monastic vows, or who may have been ordained but returned to lay life after setting out to teach in the West.

I believe that this shift in teaching authority played a monumental role in the revamping of mindfulness and thus in extending it into new domains never found in the Buddhist traditions of Asia. In the Buddhist countries of the Theravāda tradition, religious life revolves around the monks and the monasteries, and it is the monks who are regarded as the custodians of the Dhamma. The grounding of spiritual authority in the monastic establishment is in some respects stultifying, binding the Dhamma to a conservative institution stubbornly bound to upholding conventional observances against the pressures of modernity. However, despite its faults, this tradition has ensured that all modes of Buddhist practice—whether scholarly, ritualistic, or contemplative—are imbued with veneration for the Three Jewels and rooted in a worldview based on the Buddha’s discourses.

While throughout Buddhist history laypeople have engaged in meditation, until recently most lay meditation had focused on the devotional practices such as recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and the “immeasurable” meditations on loving-kindness and compassion. Often practice was undertaken in short sessions on the lunar observance days, performed in a semi-ritualistic manner according to simplified versions of the instructions provided by such manuals as the *Visuddhimagga*.⁴ However, starting early in the twentieth century, several Burmese meditation masters—most prominent among them Ledi Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw—opened up the gates of meditation practice to laypeople, and it was through these gates that curious young Westerners stepped when they arrived in Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was only natural that in their encounter with the Dhamma they would bring along the questions and problems that reflected their cultural backgrounds and personal needs. Inevitably, they took away from Buddhism answers that corresponded to these needs, and when they began to teach, their own understanding of the Dhamma shaped the way they would communicate the teachings to others. This became the legacy they would transmit to their own students and down the line to future generations.

⁴ Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli as *The Path of Purification* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991).

While much water has flowed beneath the bridge since the practice of mindfulness was first introduced to the West, the basic shape the teaching received at the hands of this early generation of Western teachers is still discernible. I already discussed several distinctive features earlier when writing about the impressions I gathered from the Dhamma talks I heard at the insight meditation centers I attended in the early 1980s. Now I want to discuss these in greater detail.⁵ To get my points across I will have to oversimplify. I do so in the recognition that such oversimplification risks obscuring significant differences among Western lay teachers and nuances in their teaching styles. The teachers fall at different points along a wide spectrum, ranging from those who are quite traditional and well versed in the canonical texts to those who are more adaptive, eclectic, and experimental. Nevertheless, despite the potential pitfalls, such generalizations can still bring dominant tendencies to light.

As I see it, what motivates most Westerners to seek out the Dhamma is an acute sense of what we might call “existential unease.” By this expression I am not referring to clinical depression, a morbid disposition, or any other type of psychopathology, but to a gnawing sense of lack, a feeling of incompleteness that cannot be appeased by easy answers or the pursuit of worldly distractions. This sense of existential unease can coexist with a personality that is, by all other criteria, quite sound and healthy. Those troubled by existential unease come to the Dhamma to resolve the anguish, to plug this hole that has opened up at the bottom of their being. Most are not seeking a new religion, a new system of worship and beliefs, or a new conceptual model for understanding the world. What they are seeking above all is a *practice*, a set of clear and pragmatic instructions that they can take up to transform and enrich the felt quality of their lives. Since they approach the Dhamma seeking a way to induce concrete changes in their life experience, this is exactly what they get from it. And if they teach others, this is what they will teach. They will present the Dhamma as a practice, a way, a path, that can ameliorate the disturbing sense of existential lack and infuse our lives with joy, zest, and meaning. They will present it as a radical, pragmatic, existential therapy that does not require any belief commitments, as a “Buddhism without beliefs” that does not ask for any more faith than a readiness to apply the method and see what one can get from it.

Now what I have called existential unease, the sense of lack, the feeling of alienation, is not unique to contemporary Western civilization. The sense of lack or insufficiency seems to be a universal feature of human experience, which different peoples will seek to redress in ways that are close at hand. Thus the Christian will turn to God, the Hindu to Shiva or Krishna or meditation on the supreme self, the Jew to the Torah, and so forth. This sense of lack also underlies the quest for liberation in Buddhism. Despite certain similarities, however, there is a difference in how this sense of lack operates in classical Buddhism and in the modern

⁵ Though what I say relates particularly to the early generation of Western pioneers, who went to Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I will frame my discourse in the present tense, as relating to present-day practitioners.

mindfulness movement.⁶ This difference, I believe, takes us to the crux of the matter. In classical Buddhism, this sense of lack or voidness is seen as *emblematic*, that is, as *pointing beyond itself* to the intrinsic unsatisfactoriness of existence itself, to the pervasive and ever-present fact of *dukkha*. The solution, therefore, lies beyond the innately flawed, deficient, and perilous world in which we are immersed, in a state, dimension, or condition that is secure, peaceful, and free from all deficiencies—that is, in *nibbāna*, the deathless. To win this state requires that one turn away from the world and step out in the direction of renunciation and transcendence. We see this pattern articulated in the legend of the Buddha’s renunciation, where his encounter with an old man, an ill man, and a corpse shattered his complacency and the figure of the ascetic showed him what he must do to resolve his inner crisis.

For the felt sense of existential suffering to trigger a clear acknowledgment of what I call “the intrinsic and ever-present unsatisfactoriness of existence,” two additional factors are needed. One is faith (*saddhā*) and the other right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*). These two factors not only turn the felt sense of existential unease into a recognition of the inherently flawed nature of conditioned existence, but in the classical Buddhist model they motivate and sustain the practice of meditation from start to finish. Thus, for the practitioner of classical Buddhism, the ultimate purpose for which mindfulness meditation is taken up is not to quell the feeling of existential angst and gain peace, joy, and equanimity in this present life—though these will naturally come as byproducts of the practice—but to win the state of unshakable liberation that lies beyond the pale of repeated birth and death.

In classical Buddhism, faith or *saddhā* is specifically tied to the Three Jewels. *Saddhā* means faith in *the Buddha* as the fully enlightened teacher, the one who has arrived at complete enlightenment; it means faith in *the Dhamma* as expressing the Buddha’s realization, the full Dhamma and not merely selected quotations; and it means faith in *the Sangha*, that is, faith in *the ariyan Sangha*, the invisible spiritual community made up of those who have realized the Dhamma, and reverence for *the monastic Sangha* as the visible, embodied, communal representation of the ariyan Sangha. For classical Buddhism, faith in the Three Jewels is specific to its objects. It is not an open variable that can attach itself to anything worthy of respect. As the traditional Pāli chant puts it: “For me there is no other refuge; the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are my only refuge.”

The other factor in classical Buddhism that guides and motivates the practice of mindfulness meditation is “right view” (*sammā diṭṭhi*). Right view has multiple facets, but following the Pāli texts, we can speak of two kinds of right view. The *foundational type* is acceptance of the principle of *kamma*, the lawful relationship that holds between volitional deeds

⁶ While the expression “classical Buddhism” is problematic, I prefer it to “traditional Buddhism” and “religious Buddhism,” which both suggest the Buddhism of rituals, ceremonies, and devotional observances. By “classical Buddhism” I have in mind the doctrines and practices of Theravāda Buddhism as derived from the Pāli Canon. Other schools of contemporary Buddhism have their own classical forms, which could be compared with modern adaptations. Here, however, I am concerned with the school from which the prevailing systems of mindfulness meditation directly stem.

and their consequences, such that unwholesome deeds bring suffering and wholesome deeds bring happiness. For followers of classical Buddhism, the operation of this law, repeatedly emphasized by the Buddha, is taken as axiomatic, beyond doubt and dispute; it is understood literally and not treated as a metaphor or symbol. Moreover, since kamma can only be truly effective if it operates through a sequence of many lives, the corollary to the right view of kamma and its fruit is acceptance of rebirth, the recognition that any single life is but a link in a series of lives that has been going on without discernible beginning and, unless sufficient effort is made, will continue without end. This too is understood literally and not treated as a metaphor.

The second level of right view is *the wisdom that understands the four noble truths*. This higher right view begins as a conceptual understanding of the four noble truths, which are grasped through study and reflection, and as the practice unfolds, it matures into direct insight into the truths and finally into penetration of them as an inseparable whole, with each truth interwoven with and reflective of the others. While in modernist adaptations of Buddhism, the four noble truths are often taught as a diagnosis of the psychology of suffering—of sorrow, discontent, worry, and fear—in classical Buddhism the four truths build upon the right view of kamma and rebirth and offer not merely a psychological diagnosis of suffering but a comprehensive *existential diagnosis* of our saṃsāric predicament. *Dukkha*, the first noble truth, is epitomized by the factors of mental and bodily experience that are "acquired" again at each new birth and then discarded at each death, the "five aggregates subject to clinging." The second noble truth, the cause of *dukkha*, is craving (*taṇhā*), described as *ponobhavikā*, "productive of renewed existence," that is, as capable of generating a new birth consisting of the five aggregates. The elimination of craving culminates not only in the extinction of sorrow, anguish, and distress, but in the unconditioned freedom of nibbāna, which is won with the ending of repeated birth.

It is these two factors—faith in the Three Jewels and right view—that I see as marking the dividing line between, on the one hand, classical Buddhism and, on the other, the various forms of Buddhist modernism, secular Buddhism, and the teaching of Buddhist meditation practices separated from their Buddhist roots. These different relationships to faith and right view are not inconsequential. They determine the vision that sustains and inspires the practice of mindfulness meditation, the expectations about the benefits to be derived, and the way the practice unfolds in actual personal experience.

What seems to be happening today, in many circles of Western Buddhism, is that the Dhamma is being taught primarily on the basis of the equation: "Dhamma equals mindfulness meditation equals bare attention." Mindfulness meditation has thus been lifted out of its original context, the context of faith in the Three Jewels and the full noble eightfold path headed by right view, including the "mundane right view" of karmic causality, and taught in a way that fits seamlessly with the secular outlook of contemporary Western society. It is thus taught not for the purpose of winning liberation from the ever-repeated cycle of birth and death, which is perilous and fraught with misery, but for the purpose of allaying existential distress simply by being attentive to what is occurring in the present moment. This is how the riddle of existence is being

solved; this is how the alienation from direct experience is being overcome, namely, by using mindfulness meditation as a bridge to take us back to the living experience of the present moment. It does not aim at transcendent liberation, but at healing inner divisions and at enhancing the appreciation of life through sustained attention to immediate experience.

As an adherent of “classical Buddhism,” I have pondered whether this mode of practice is intrinsically capable of leading to the full enlightenment and ultimate liberation that the Buddha’s way of mindfulness is intended to bring. And the answer that I have come to, based on my reflections and reading of the texts, is that on its own it cannot. The Buddha made right mindfulness a factor of the noble eightfold path, and thus to unfold its full potential and culminate in the ultimate goal, it would seem that it must be guided by right view and accompanied by the other path factors such as right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, and right effort. It must lead on to the following steps, to right concentration and right cognition, culminating in liberation.

4. A Case Study: the Contemplation of Impermanence

I want to exemplify my point by considering how classical Buddha Dhamma and the modern mindfulness movement diverge in their perspectives on the contemplation of impermanence. Both share the understanding that the fact of impermanence entails the injunction: “Don’t cling, for if you cling to what is impermanent, you will eventually suffer.” However, the two approaches to the Dhamma draw different conclusions from this maxim—indeed, almost contrary conclusions. For classical Buddhism, insight into impermanence is the passageway to a radical understanding of the second characteristic, the *dukkha-lakkhana*, the mark of suffering: “Whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*.” This does not mean, of course, that whatever is impermanent is a mass of misery, but rather that whatever is impermanent is inherently flawed, inadequate, and defective, unable to provide lasting happiness and security. The first two characteristics—impermanence and *dukkha*—jointly entail the third, the selfless nature of phenomena, the absence of genuine selfhood in all the bases of self-identification, summed up in the five aggregates: bodily form, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness.

The suttas then marshal impermanence and *dukkha* together to expose the third characteristic, the non-self nature of all the constituents of individual being. Again and again they hammer home the message: “Whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*. Whatever is impermanent, *dukkha*, and subject to change, should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” This module of contemplation is applied to all five aggregates, thereby breaking the identification with them.

Contemporary teachers of insight meditation also dwell on the teaching of non-self, often hailing it as the core of the Dhamma. This focus has opened up avenues of dialogue between proponents of insight meditation and neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, and psychotherapists. Debates have even been waged between those who see Buddhist meditation and psychotherapy as pointing in the same direction—toward healthy ego function marked by

the reduction of narcissistic self-obsession—and those who see them as pointing in opposite directions. Some take the contrast between them as antithetical, so that one must be jettisoned in favor of the other; others take them to be different but complementary.

Nevertheless, a significant difference can still be discerned between the perspectives on impermanence advocated by teachers of modern mindfulness meditation and by classical Buddhism. Proponents of modern mindfulness meditation often see impermanence as imbued with positive significance. They admit that clinging to what is impermanent brings suffering, but take this connection to mean, not that one should renounce the impermanent in favor of the imperishable *nibbāna*, but that one should learn to live in the world with an open mind and loving heart, capable of experiencing everything with awe and wonder. The practice of mindfulness thus leads through the door of impermanence and selflessness to a new affirmation and appreciation of the world, so that one can joyfully savor each fleeting event, each relationship, each undertaking in its wistful evanescence, unperturbed when it passes.

This attitude, though it has some resonances with Zen Buddhism particularly as expressed by Thich Nhat Hanh, is quite at odds with the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon, the tradition from which mindfulness meditation originates. In classical Buddhism the fact of impermanence is viewed as a sign of deficiency, a warning signal that the things we turn to for happiness are unworthy of our ultimate concern. As the Buddha says: “Conditioned things, monks, are impermanent, unstable, unreliable. It is enough to be disenchanted with all conditioned things, enough to be dispassionate toward them, enough to be liberated from them” (SN 15:20, II 193).

The process of contemplation that leads from impermanence to non-self does not come to a stop with insight into the non-self nature of things but serves a purpose beyond itself. It is designed to put an end to identification and appropriation, to eliminate the ingrained tendencies to take things to be “I” and “mine.” This insight leads to disenchantment, dispassion, and liberation: “Seeing the five aggregates thus [as not mine, not I, not my self], one becomes disenchanted with them. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. When the mind is liberated, one directly knows: ‘It is liberated.’”⁷ And liberation (*vimutti*) here means the release of the mind from the taints (*āsavas*) and fetters (*samyojanas*), the primordial forces that drive the cycle of rebirths. When they are eliminated, the cycle itself comes to an end and one knows the task is done: “One understands: ‘Birth is finished; the spiritual life has been lived; what had to be one has been done; there is no further coming back to this state of being.’”⁸

⁷ The formula appears numberless times. See for example SN 22:49, V 49–50; SN 22:59, V 67–68; and SN 22:82, V 104. SN = Saṃyutta Nikāya, translated by me under the title *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000). The references give chapter and sutta numbers, followed by the volume and page number of the Pali Text Society’s Roman-script edition

⁸ This formula, too, appears numberless times. See for example SN 22:12–20, V 21–24; SN 22:63–72, V 74–81, and so forth.

5. The Trajectory in Retrospect

The trajectory that mindfulness has followed over the past forty or fifty years demonstrates that context determines function. Looked at in the abstract, mindfulness appears to be completely transparent as to its function. It is simply the bending back of the beam of awareness upon oneself, to clearly illuminate one's bodily and mental experience. As such it can be used for diverse purposes, spiritual and worldly, lofty and mundane, humble and profound. In classical Buddhism the purposes to which it is applied are determined by the parameters of the Buddha's teaching. It is cultivated to enhance the ability to sustain attention on an object, which leads to *samādhi* or concentration and *paññā* or wisdom. However, though utilized in the Buddhist path, the bare act of mindfulness is context neutral. As modern exponents of mindfulness meditation are fond of saying, mindfulness does not carry around a banner stating that it is inherently Buddhist.

In the late twentieth century, Theravāda Buddhist mindfulness meditation was fissured along several lines, leading to new and unexpected bends and twists in the destiny of this ancient practice. In the initial phase, the Western seekers who returned home after training under Asian Buddhist masters taught the way of mindfulness as a non-religious discipline that could be as relevant and beneficial to non-Buddhist practitioners as to those who placed faith in the Buddha and his Dhamma. To justify this approach, they appealed to an adage that became very popular: "The Buddha didn't teach Buddhism; he taught the Dhamma." Though at first glance such a claim appeared innocuous, in time it amounted to a virtual "declaration of independence" severing insight meditation from its anchorage in Buddhist religious faith. Thereby it propelled the practice along a new trajectory.

To understand, from a traditional perspective, what has happened to mindfulness in the course of its transition, I find it helpful to set it in relation to a scheme I employed in my anthology of the Buddha's discourses, *In the Buddha's Words* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005). In preparing this anthology, I organized my selection of suttas by way of the three benefits to which the practice of the Dhamma is said to lead: (1) welfare and happiness visible in this present life; (2) welfare and happiness pertaining to future lives; and (3) the supreme good, which is nibbāna. The means to "the welfare and happiness visible in this present life" is generosity, ethical conduct, and other acts that lead to interpersonal and communal harmony. The "welfare and happiness pertaining to future lives" is the attainment of a fortunate rebirth. The practices that lead to this kind of well-being are essentially the same as those that lead to welfare and happiness in this present life, but they are viewed from a higher standpoint rooted in the acceptance of kamma as the determinant of human destiny and rebirth into various planes as the natural result of kamma. The third type of benefit, the supreme good, is nibbāna, liberation from the entire cycle of rebirths. This cannot be won simply by virtuous conduct and meritorious deeds but requires the development of the noble eightfold path, with particular emphasis on the cultivation of concentration and wisdom.

It is in relation to this third type of benefit that the way of mindfulness plays a central role. The four establishments of mindfulness are said to be “the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the extinction of pain and dejection, for the achievement of the true way, and for the realization of nibbāna” (SN 47:1, V 141). They are “noble and emancipation, and lead the one who practices them outward to the complete destruction of suffering” (SN 47:17, V 166). When developed and cultivated, they “lead to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to superior knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna” (SN 47:32, V 179). In other words, in its original context, the cultivation of mindfulness is an integral part of a contemplative path to world-transcending liberation. The practice builds upon the second level of teaching, on kamma, rebirth, and the round of birth and death. It presupposes a critical insight into the intrinsic flaws of the human condition and a transcendent vision of the ultimately worthy goal of human endeavor. To lift the practice out from this context and transfer it to another context governed by a secular worldview and mundane ends is to alter its function in crucial ways. It transforms the function of mindfulness from the spiritually liberative to the therapeutic, from the sacred to the ordinary, from the life-transcending to the life-affirming.

It seems to me that in the West this is just what has happened with the practice of mindfulness, and the process already started with the pioneering teachers of insight meditation as they sought to disseminate the practice in the new cultural setting. Since these teachers did not emphasize the Buddhist worldview of rebirth or inculcate faith in the Three Jewels, they marginalized the second level of teaching, that aimed at the good in future lives, which disappeared from view. To underscore the therapeutic capacity of the practice, they merged the first and third levels of teachings, so that practices prescribed for attaining the supreme good, liberation from the round of birth and death, were presented as a means for attaining well-being and happiness here and now. Mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom became, not the means for breaking the fetters that bind us to saṃsāra, but qualities that “free the heart” so that we can live meaningfully, happily, peacefully in the present, acting on the basis of our perception of the interconnectedness of all life. The aim of the practice was still said to be freedom, but it was an immanent freedom, really more a kind of inner healing than *vimutti* in the classical sense of the word. This reconceptualization of the training may have made the practice of mindfulness much more palatable than would have been the case if it were taught in its original context. But the omission may have set in motion a process that, for all its advantages, is actually eviscerating mindfulness from within.

In making these observations, I do not wish to demean in any way the efforts of the early pioneers who brought insight meditation to the West. They discovered the practice of mindfulness at a time when it was sorely needed and skillfully molded it to the situation at hand. The West was floundering in a morass of spiritual and moral emptiness. Materialism and commercialism were rampant, and people suffered from unbearable stress, confusion, and inner conflict. Under such conditions, the mode of mindfulness training the new teachers designed may have had inestimable value. It fostered such precious qualities as contentment, joy,

gentleness, kindness, patience, equanimity, and compassion. It helped people learn to live at peace with themselves, to cherish the natural world, and to live more amicably with others.

What is worrisome, however, is the subsequent trajectory that mindfulness took once they had inserted a wedge between meditation practice on the one side and its supportive envelope of Buddhist faith, ethics, and understanding on the other. The first act of separation was followed by still sharper divisions between classical Buddhism and the mindfulness movement. In Act Two, mindfulness meditation came to be taught, deliberately and emphatically, as a non-religious discipline. Initially, this took place with the emergence of “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction,” which was offered in a gesture of compassion to help people crushed by stress and chronic pain regain their hope and inner dignity. Before long, MBSR was given a still broader mandate, reformed to teach ordinary people, weighed down by the dull routines of their daily lives, how to find sources of meaning and joy through sustained attention to the present.

In Act Three, mindfulness was aligned with other “caring professions,” which led to multiple mergers and marriages that gave birth to children of their own. As it flowed downstream still further it became a secular form of inner hygiene, similar to yoga but with a more distinctive psychological flavor. At the mouth of the river, where we stand now, mindfulness has become a handy buzzword that can be attached at random to virtually any product or skill in order to invest it with a spiritual aura or increase its market appeal: mindful romance, mindful birthing, mindful athletics, mindful exercise, mindful business strategies, mindful warfare. Perhaps, just over the horizon, we’ll find some entrepreneurs pushing mindful mindfulness.

The severing of mindfulness practice from the Buddha Dhamma may well bring unforeseen benefits. It has already proved effective in helping people deal with chronic pain and illness and has opened doors to personal growth for people in all walks of life, folks who would never have passed through the gates of a Buddhist monastery. In scientific circles the study of mindfulness is opening fresh avenues in the understanding of the relationship between the mind and the brain. In the caring professions it has revealed its potentials for fostering healthier personal attitudes and better human relationships. Its impact in various domains of human activity—from health care to education to romance—will no doubt endure and exercise a positive influence. Perhaps mindfulness will even lead to a new era of peace and international cooperation. As a commodity being pushed and promoted in the global marketplace, mindfulness will perhaps flourish for a while and then, like so many other fads, fall into oblivion. As for the long-term repercussions of the secularization of mindfulness on Buddhism itself, this remains to be seen.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk, scholar, and translator of Buddhist texts from the Pāli Canon. After completing a PhD in philosophy at Claremont Graduate School (1972), he traveled to Sri Lanka, where he received novice ordination in 1972 and full ordination in 1973, both under the renowned scholar-monk Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya. Ven. Bodhi lived in Asia for 24 years, primarily in Sri Lanka. He returned to the U.S. in 2002. In 2008, he founded Buddhist Global Relief, a nonprofit dedicated to helping communities afflicted

by chronic hunger and malnutrition. He now lives and teaches at Chuang Yen Monastery near Carmel, New York.