

The Origin of Mindfulness Revisited: A Conceptual and Historical Review

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Abstract: Mindfulness, a psychological construct gaining significant attention in contemporary psychology, originates in ancient traditions. This study aims to shed light on the inception of mindfulness by exploring its profound roots to achieve a deeper understanding of the evolutionary journey of ancient wisdom. Through comprehensive conceptual and historical review, the origin of mindfulness is revisited, uncovering its multifaceted essence. Mindfulness was expounded by referring to its original Pali term, “sati”, which was decoded to “memory”. The conventional description of mindfulness differs from its modern interpretation, as the Buddhist viewpoint emphasizes its role in alleviating unnecessary suffering by nurturing a comprehension of the mind’s mechanisms and the fundamental nature of the material world to pave the way to attain inner tranquility and liberation and awakening.

Keywords: mindfulness, buddhist tradition, noble eightfold path

1. Introduction

In today’s rapidly changing and increasingly fast-paced modern society, individuals face growing pressures and anxieties, searching for inner peace and happiness more crucial than ever. In recent years, a traditional yet contemporary practice called “Mindfulness” has been gaining popularity in Western culture. It stands as one of the most popular topics in clinical and fundamental research within psychology. According to Hanh [1],

“Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves. Consider, for example: a magician who cuts his body into many parts and places each part in a different region – hands in the south, arms in the east, legs in the north, and then by some miraculous power lets forth a cry which reassembles whole every part of his body. Mindfulness is like that – it is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life.”

Mindfulness involves a sustained, present-moment awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and the environment around them. Embracing mindfulness entails qualities like openness, non-judgmental attitude, friendliness, curiosity, acceptance, compassion and kindness. Mindfulness practices involve directing attention to current perceptions, emotions and thought processes, advocating non-judgmental observation and acceptance of whatever arises within oneself. These practices can take on formal forms, such as focused breathing, seated meditation, mindful walking and body scanning, or informal forms, like integrating mindfulness into daily activities [2].

Bodhi contends that mindfulness as a concept has become “so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cipher into which one can read virtually anything we want” [3]. Although various definitions of mindfulness exist, a common thread running through classical and other interpretations is the vigilant awareness of the mind, body and behavioral processes [3-4]. One frequently mentioned definition of mindfulness, proposed by Kabat-Zinn, is the state of awareness that emerges by “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” [5]. Similar descriptions of mindfulness are also given by other scholars. Baer, for instance, defines mindfulness as “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” [6]. Moreover, Kabat-Zinn pointed out that mindfulness has been linked, both theoretically and through research evidence, to enhancing psychological well-being [7]. The core components of mindfulness, which include being fully aware and non-judgmentally accepting of one’s present experiences, are considered potentially powerful remedies for various types of psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, rumination, worry, fear, anger and others. These distressing emotions often result from unhealthy patterns of trying to avoid, suppress, or excessively engage with them [8-9].

Mindfulness, as a deeply rooted method of spiritual practice, has sparked widespread interest and research in fields such as psychology, medicine, neuroscience and social sciences. Furthermore, the current theoretical and scientific fascination with mindfulness becomes even more noteworthy when viewed in the historical context of psychology, psychiatry and related areas [10]. Mindfulness has garnered extensive attention as a psychological intervention method, in particular, aiming to cultivate individuals’ self-awareness and acceptance of the present moment [11]. This approach helps people alleviate symptoms of psychological disorders, improve their quality of life and enhance overall mental health and well-being. However, despite its broad recognition and application in modern times, the true origin and historical development of mindfulness often remain overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to explore the origin of mindfulness, tracing its profound roots to gain a deeper insight into ancient wisdom’s evolutionary journey. The approach employed in this paper involves a comprehensive review of historical literature and an in-depth analysis of classical texts, complemented by contemporary research findings in order to understand better the essence of mindfulness, cultural and philosophical implications, as well as its relevance and significance in modern society better. This review will revisit the definition of mindfulness within the context of ancient traditions, particularly its prominent role in Buddhism, which has contributed to the evolution and expansion of mindfulness as we know it today.

2. Mindfulness and the Buddhist Tradition

The extensive Buddhist textual heritage is substantial, with origins dating back to the early Pali Cannon 1, believed to have emerged as early as the 1st century BC [12]. The term “Mindfulness”, as found in the Buddhist textual tradition, is an English translation of the Pali word, the language in which the Buddha’s teachings were initially documented [13]. It appears that T. W. Rhys Davids, as one of the early pioneers in the Western exploration of Pali texts, was the first to translate the Buddhist technical term “sati” into the English word “mindfulness” and founded the Pali Text Society in 1881.

2.1. Mindfulness and Remembering

While the translation “mindfulness” has now become relatively standard in English, its suitability in every context is not entirely evident. The semantic scope of Pali “sati” does not precisely align with that of English “mindfulness” [14-15]. As expressed by Dunne, “the Buddhist tradition is not monolithic” [16]. Rhys David highlighted the etymological meaning of Pali “sati” as English

“memory” and further proposed the manner in which the term is employed in Buddhist texts to describe a form of paying attention [17]. Gethin noted that in the majority of Buddhist scholars [18-21], “sati” originates from the verb “to remember” or the action of “recollection”. In the ancient Abhidhamma texts, which constitute one of the three sections of the Buddhist Tripitaka, the term “sati” has been linked with various interpretations, encompassing concepts such as retrieval, memory, retention and freedom of distraction. However, within the realm of meditation, the role of “sati” differs from that of memory [21-22]. Didonna also contended that it does not mean the memory of past events [23]. If we primarily view memory as the capacity to recall the past, or memories as what is remembered, then the Buddhist utilization of “sati” in the context of different meditation practices might appear perplexing, as these exercises are not initially intended for the explicit purpose of recollecting the past [14]. It entails being aware and paying attention, emphasizing the significance of intention in mindfulness practice. In each moment, we prompt ourselves: “Remember - to be aware!” [23]. However, “mindfulness” encompasses more than simply being passively aware. Based on Purser & Milillo, mindfulness goes beyond being a passive and non-judgmental focus on the present moment [12]. It is an actively involved awareness that has the ability to recall and discern right and wrong phenomena, whether they took place in the past or are unfolding at the moment, aiming to ultimately let go of those that result in future suffering [22]. Thanissaro & DeGraff claimed that the intended purpose of “sati” in the Buddhist path is to eliminate suffering [21]. This view is consistent with Didonna, where the purpose of mindfulness in its traditional context is to alleviate unnecessary suffering by developing insights into the workings of the mind and the nature of the material world [23]. The practitioner of mindfulness actively engages with a mindful state to enhance inner peace and tranquility, no longer being disturbed or perturbed by external distractions and turmoil.

2.2. Mindfulness and Present-moment Awareness

“Sati”, on the other hand, brings a specific attitude towards one’s current experience. In other words, it is an ability that entails concentrating on the current moment, rather than lingering on the past or pondering about the future. According to Anālayo, “sati”, also known as “mindfulness”, involves improving the ability to remember through broadening the scope of awareness [20]. Gethin also pointed out, mindfulness means “standing near” or “guarding” the mind. It is a state of being fully aware and attentive to the present moment, embracing and observing one’s current thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and surrounding environment without becoming entangled and disturbed by any thoughts of the past or future [22]. Baer stated that focusing on the present moment includes consciously or effortlessly directing one’s attention to both internal and external experiences happening in each moment of awareness [6]. It is distinguished from states where the mind is occupied with thoughts related to memories of the past or visions of the future [24]. For instance, rumination, a thought-processing disorder, refers to repetitive thinking, overthinking or dwelling on negative emotions, problems or concerns. When an individual engages in rumination, they constantly repeat thoughts about distressing experiences, past failures or unresolved issues, and it becomes challenging for them to break free from this negative thought cycle. This excessive thinking often exacerbates negative emotions, leads to mental health issues and may interfere with an individual’s daily life and work. This is a common instance in which individuals lack concentration on the current moment, being absorbed in repetitive thoughts from previous experiences without conscious awareness [25]. Through mindfulness practice, individuals learn to be aware and accept negative emotions, avoiding getting stuck in ruminating thought patterns. Mindfulness can be regarded as an effective mechanism to help individuals focus on the present moment rather than being engulfed in past regrets or future worries. As Anālayo highlighted, a primary objective of “sati” involves breaking free from automatic responses and habitual ways of

perceiving [20]. This process leads to a gradual reshaping of how things are perceived, resulting in an unfiltered understanding of reality, which navigates a balanced approach that neither suppresses experiences nor impulsively reacts to them.

3. Mindfulness and the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path

Mindfulness is closely linked to the "Right Mindfulness" aspect within the *Noble Eightfold Path* in Buddhism, paving the way to attain inner tranquility, liberation and awakening. The Buddha's eightfold path is a core doctrine in Buddhism, considered to be the path towards liberation and enlightenment. It is the fourth of the *Four Noble Truths* (the essence of Buddha's teachings) in Buddhism and also serves as one of the fundamental guiding principles of the faith. The eightfold path emphasizes a comprehensive way of ethical, wise and behavioral living, aiming to help individuals transcend suffering and ignorance to achieve inner peace and wisdom [26]. It includes elements that counteract the tendencies influenced by what Buddhists refer to as the fundamental sources of suffering, that is, desire or attachment, aversion or animosity and confusion or ignorance [27]. The eightfold path comprises the eight aspects: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Spotlighting several essential elements as follows, Bodhi stated [28],

1. *Right Review*: Having a correct understanding of the nature of life and reality, including understanding causality and the impermanence of life.

2. *Right Intention*: Cultivating intentions of goodwill, compassion and non-attachment to purify the mind.

3. *Right Speech*: Avoiding falsehood, harsh speech, slander and offensive language to promote harmony and goodwill.

4. *Right Action*: Following ethical guidelines, refraining from harming and engaging in unethical behavior to establish positive behavioral patterns.

5. *Right Livelihood*: Choosing a suitable occupation and livelihood, avoiding industries that involve harming life or unethical practices.

6. *Right Effort*: Making an effort to cultivate positive thoughts and action, overcome negative emotions and maintain a wholesome mental state.

7. *Right Mindfulness*: Being aware of the present moment, cultivating inner calm and wisdom, and not being disturbed by thoughts of past or future.

8. *Right Concentration*: Achieving inner focus and tranquility through deep meditation, enabling the mind to transcend desires and distractions to attain a state of liberation.

These eight interconnected constituents not only collaborate in a way that eradicates the mental, emotional and behavioral patterns that give rise to psychological distress but also form integrated guidance to lead individuals in the pursuit of ethics, wisdom and liberation. According to Wallace and Shapiro, the eightfold path is known as the middle way due to its equilibrium achieved through moderation, avoiding the extremes of excessive self-indulgence or severe self-denial, which provides a method to harmonize any disparities in connotation, attention, cognition and emotion [29]. Moreover, it fosters the development of the finest qualities by nurturing optimal, compassionate and wise ways of perceiving, existing and comprehending [27].

4. Conclusions

Mindfulness has gained considerable attention in recent years due to its potential benefits for mental health and overall well-being. The trajectory began with psychotherapeutic programs and treatments, and now it has become a prevalent and commercially viable topic. However, even though mindfulness is widely acknowledged and practiced in contemporary society, its authentic origins

and historical progression are frequently disregarded. The aim of this paper is to illuminate the origin of mindfulness, following its deep-seated origins in order to attain a more profound understanding of the evolutionary path of ancient wisdom. Through this conceptual and historical review, the origin of mindfulness is revisited, revealing its multifaceted and intricate nature. Mindfulness was elucidated by referencing the original Pali expression “sati”, denoting “memory” in its literal sense. The traditional description of mindfulness varies from the modern interpretation in that the Buddhist perspective underscores that the purpose of mindfulness is to relieve needless suffering by cultivating an understanding of the mind’s mechanisms and the essence of the physical world. Furthermore, mindfulness emphasizes being present at the moment, which involves intentionally or naturally guiding one’s focus toward both internal and external occurrences unfolding during each moment of awareness. In addition, mindfulness and “Right Mindfulness” within the Buddha’s *Noble Eightfold Path* are closely intertwined, forming an essential pathway towards inner tranquility and liberation. In conclusion, mindfulness encompasses both the embodiment of timeless wisdom and modern applicability. The origin of mindfulness carries a rich heritage of historical wisdom while providing valuable guidance for contemporary living. What is more, it is regarded as a pathway to awakening and enlightenment as well as a potent element for achieving psychological freedom. By integrating mindfulness with modern science, we can contribute significantly to humanity’s physical and mental well-being. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the diverse applications of mindfulness while honoring the historical Buddha, who imparted the fundamental teachings of mindfulness.

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