



De-Mystifying Mindfulness

Module Three: Philosophy of/& Mindfulness

These readings have been prepared to support students of the MOOC: *De-Mystifying Mindfulness*. They are based on the lectures written for the course; the intention is to develop them into chapters for a comprehensive open-access textbook to support learning in this field.

We invite feedback and suggestions for additional material.

We also invite donations to assist in our mission to make this material available to anyone, anywhere who might benefit from it: *building knowledge for a more a more mindful world*.

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Introduction

As we've seen in the last couple of modules, there is a widespread assumption in the Science of Mindfulness that when we look for the philosophical foundations of Mindfulness, we're looking into Buddhism.

In this module we're going to go into a little more depth about the reasons for this and the extent to which this makes sense. One of the concerns that we've already explored in some detail is whether modern 'construct Mindfulness' (that we explored in the last module) has been guided in its development by Buddhism, or whether its development and characteristics have really been driven by the imperatives of operationalization and quantitative measurement.

One of the issues to which this question should alert us concerns our vision of the meaning of history and development itself. To put this in rather vulgar terms, modern science is invested in the idea of progressive knowledge. This means that, with some important and notable exceptions, science envisions itself as involved in the gradual refinement and improvement of ideas, concepts, theories, and artefacts. Modern medicine, for instance, is better in almost every conceivable way than medieval medicine. The assumption in this worldview is that the first version of things is rarely the best version, which is why we make prototypes and test things, hoping always to be able to improve them. This means that the 'original' is not per se the best or real version of something; it's just a first attempt.



Of course, this vision of scientific progress is rather irreverent (and unapologetically so). Indeed, as we saw in the last module, reverence and science don't mix very easily (unless, of course, it's reverence for science itself ... and that can cause its own problems).

Conversely, however, we might adopt a vision of the significance of history in which the original version of something represents its most pristine and pure form. This could be a religious attitude, where the original is some form of sacred revelation, or it could be a species of a philological attitude, in which the original is simply the real version of something that later becomes confused, contaminated, or confounded by the interpretations of others. Human history, if you like, takes us further and further away from Truth, not progressive closer towards it.

These issues are especially relevant to the ways in which Westerners have talked about Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism and other religious or spiritual traditions that seem to have developed outside the European context. Indeed, since the late 1970s (following the landmark publication of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*) the Humanities have been very self-conscious about the risks of privileging the idea that the 'Orient' (wherever that might be) is a reservoir filled with ancient, mysterious, and pristine original meanings (while the West is represented a space of progressive, experimental, scientific knowledge).

A symptom of this ideological tendency is, for instance, that most of the attention given to Buddhism in scientific Mindfulness is focussed on texts from 2,500 years ago – the 'original' texts, like

the Pali Satipatthana Sutta (which we'll consider in the next session). While there are good reasons for this, one of the dangers is that more than two millennia of criticism, debate and philosophical enquiry into the concept and practice of Mindfulness in Asian Buddhism are basically ignored.

This danger is at least two-fold: first, Mindfulness scientists and practitioners in the West miss out on the incredible wealth of learning about this field that has developed in Asia over thousands of years and thus risk struggling to re-invent the wheel; and second, they risk giving the distasteful impression that these thousands of years of knowledge don't count precisely because they took place in Asia and not in London, Paris, or New York – that is, modern science has to start again with the original texts and do it properly.

One consequence of this is that some of the material about (or perhaps some of the claims about) Buddhist Mindfulness in the field today can seem rather naïve (or even offensive) to well-informed Buddhists or scholars of Buddhism; the Dalai Lama himself is on record as saying that secular Mindfulness seems like a positive technology, but that it is not Buddhism.

In practice, of course, many individual thinkers, scientists, and practitioners are very careful, creative, and responsible about how they navigate through these issues. However, the atmosphere of the field as a whole does tend in a kind of Orientalist direction. We see quite a bit of language like 'East' vs 'West' or (perhaps worse) 'East' vs 'Science' in the literature (as though these are opposing categories), which risks locating some of the discussions back in the debates of Cultural Studies in the 1980s: when 'we' (whoever 'we' are) label something as 'Eastern' (or Western, come to that) what is the actual content of what we're saying and (if we really thought about it properly) would we really want to say it?

One of the things that this kind of language often disguises is the unequivocal fact that the 'East' is not a place or even a coherent category. It is an ideological marker or umbrella. It not only acts to separate various ideas and artefacts from the 'West' or from 'science,' but it also blurs things together. The 'East' becomes a label that asserts the unity of (say) Buddhist, Daoist, Hindu ideas as though they are all part of a common entity. Mindfulness,

martial arts, yoga, qi-gong seem to merge into one. More worryingly for us, this blurry logic extends to other terms, such that 'Buddhism' is often presented as though it's a single entity rather than a constellation of multiple complicated, fractured, and sophisticated traditions.

Certainly not all, but quite a few interventions into the space of Mindfulness as science and therapy blur together half a dozen different Buddhist traditions – stirring in a touch of Zen, a sprinkling of Vipassana, and an eclectic mix of Theravada sects – as though baking a cake. The image of the Dalai Lama is often placed like a cherry on the top, as though the head of the (numerically very small) Tibetan tradition represents all Buddhism.



One pressing question at this point is whether any of this actually matters. Does it matter if 'construct Mindfulness' has cobbled together an eclectic and inconsistent sense of its origins in a representation of Buddhism (that mixes various Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions together because of their ostensible 'Easternness')? After all, 'construct Mindfulness' is a modern construction that constantly seeks to improve and refine its effectiveness by testing and incorporating new ideas and components. Its point is not philosophical or spiritual fidelity or conservatism, it's not ideological respectability, but rather its point is to be maximally effective as a therapeutic or life-style intervention today.

If the cake tastes good, isn't that enough?

From the standpoint of Buddhism as a religion or tradition, this kind of eclecticism might appear offensive and even violent. It pulls things apart that should be revered as integrated or whole.

This rather post-modern approach also sets up the possibility that scientists, instructors, and therapists of Mindfulness might make claims about Buddhism (in good faith) that are not really about Buddhism at all, but instead are about construct Mindfulness. Hence, this kind of practical eclecticism (which is simply designed to improve the construct) might result in general confusion about the relationship between construct Mindfulness, Buddhist Mindfulness, and Buddhism as a whole – which is, of course, exactly what we find in many places. However, it's important to remember that this kind of confusion does not make the method

wrong per se, it just calls attention to the need for better education and clarity about what's going on.

In other words, it's neither self-evident that construct Mindfulness is simply a modern expression of an original Buddhist Mindfulness, nor that it should be.

The relationship between modern Mindfulness and Buddhism is not simple and certainly not linear.

One thing that is very clear, however, is that the long, sophisticated, and intricate history of Buddhism and other traditions contain plenty of invaluable resources to help us (today) to think about and refine a 'construct Mindfulness' that works for us. This means, very simply, that practicing modern Mindfulness does not mean we are participating in Buddhism and it does not make us into Buddhists (whether we want it to or not). If our interest is in becoming a Buddhist, we should become Buddhists.

It's worth sitting with this insight for a little while: *yes, all Buddhists should practice Mindfulness, but that doesn't mean that everyone who practices Mindfulness is a Buddhist ...* It doesn't even mean that these practices should be the same.

One of the really liberating lessons from this is that the task of philosophy in the field of the Science of Mindfulness is not to attempt to map (or even to justify an assumed map between) construct Mindfulness and, say, the Buddhist concept of Sati. Instead, the contribution of philosophy is to help us identify resources that enliven our understanding of the meaning and potentials of the modern (transnational) construct. This immediately opens the field to investigations of other (non-Buddhist) bodies of thought. We might consider Daoism, for instance, as we will in this module, or Stoicism or Quietism or any number of other philosophical movements. We might look at contemporary philosophy in different parts of the world, or we might consider the valuable philosophical contributions made by literature or poetry or art.

Even a cursory look at Jon Kabat-Zinn's now classic book, *Wherever you go there you are* (1994), will demonstrate how this might be done. If you haven't read it, read it.

Such textual work is not only in order to help scientists and therapists understand how construct Mindfulness might be deployed, but, as we saw in the last module, it's also a way to support the significant number of practitioners who engage with secular mindfulness in the context of Interventions like MBSR and MBCT only to find themselves thirsty for (or even in quite desperate need of) more analytically and conceptually sophisticated interpretations of their experiences and what these mean for their lives.

Such practitioners are often frustrated by what can seem like the anti-intellectualism of Mindfulness Interventions, in which (as we've seen) the emphasis is very much on the experiential cultivation of a particular mode of attention and way of being (or what we've seen Williams call 'being mode'), rather than on analysis, reasoned interrogation, and intellectual striving (or 'doing mode').

Practitioners who push this issue are usually directed to Buddhist organizations, teachers, or texts for further insight; and, indeed, it is not clear that therapeutic programmes of Mindfulness Training like MBSR and MBCT are the appropriate places for philosophical enquiry of any kind. Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible of us to ignore the fact that some practitioners feel that they need this kind of insight to support their practice, and some of those are uncomfortable with the assumption that they should naturally turn to Buddhism (or at least only to Buddhism) for it.

To be clear, I don't want to denigrate this turn to Buddhism (for many it's genuinely wonderful and for all of us it is extremely valuable), but, if we take the idea of construct Mindfulness seriously, this shouldn't be the only option for practitioners. As soon as we limit the philosophical field to Buddhism, we run the risk that we're secretly assuming that Mindfulness is really Buddhism after all, and hence that we're quietly smuggling it into hospitals and schools and offices.

Rather than engaging in this kind of smuggling, we should at least be able to enable practitioners to search for understanding and inspiration in a range of philosophical traditions, not only (but definitely also) in Buddhism. If nothing else, many practitioners are searching for inspirational and aspirational models and ideal types, as we saw back in the first module of this course: the monk,

the ninja, the Jedi, the hippie etc. And then, as we discovered in the last module, where we choose to place our attention has real meaning for our emotional tone and the way we signify our experiences in the world. In other words, the things we choose as aspirations or inspirations change how we experience ourselves and the world around us. Belief and spirituality are themselves transformational factors. As we've noted before, and as we'll see again, this insight has a similar taste to the Buddhist teaching of expedient means.



And finally, it is important to be aware that one of the common aspects of all the philosophies that we'll consider in this context in the rest of this module is their emphasis on practice. That is, in keeping with the empirical findings from tests in MBSR and MBCT, each of these philosophical systems makes the case that intellectual reasoning and technical knowledge is not enough to bring about experiential or existential transformation. So, knowing, talking, and debating about Mindfulness does not make us Mindful. And, at the same time, all of them emphasise that real change (ie. the change that matters) must be some form of embodied change. Mindfulness isn't something we know, it's something we (should) become by practicing it. A vital implication of this is that even if we could envision a form of talking-therapy to assist practitioners with the existential anxieties that are not addressed in conventional Mindfulness Interventions, any such vision must supplement existing experiential approaches, not replace them.

So, in this module, we're going to start by exploring a range of Buddhist ideas about Mindfulness, beginning with the notion of 'sati' itself, but then wandering through associated developments such as samatha (or calm abiding) and vipassana (or insight). We will even take a quick plunge into the Zen practice of shikantaza (or just sitting). Using these ideas as our springboard, we'll then leap briefly through some other traditions of thought that seem to speak to common issues, such as Daoism, Stoicism, and various currents in contemporary philosophy, such as Pragmatism.

In the end, before we move on to the next module and a consideration of the social, ethical, and political impact of Mindfulness today, this module should give us a sense of what

kinds of ideas, challenges, and opportunities Mindfulness presents to our vision of our place in the world around us.



3.1. *Satipatthana*

As we've already seen a few times, the conventional starting place when drawing connections between Buddhism and Mindfulness is to look at the Pali term *sati* (*smṛti* in Sanskrit), which appears in the oldest surviving canonical texts of Buddhism, probably composed in India in about the fourth century BCE.

Sati is the term that was first translated into English as Mindfulness (probably by TW Rhys-Davids in 1881), and it features in the title of the sutta (discourse) that is most commonly cited by Mindfulness practitioners today: the *Satipatthana Sutta* (The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness).

While 'Mindfulness' has become the conventional translation, it's quite clear that the meaning of *sati* in Pali tends towards something more like remembering, in at least two important senses.

The first is in the way that it suggests a 'bringing to mind' and a 'keeping in mind' – so, remembering in the sense of not forgetting the object of a meditation, for instance.

The second, which is quite often overlooked, is in the way that it suggests a bringing into the body; when we remember, we re-

member, which is significantly different from re-collecting or re-calling in that it involves embodiment. This sense of sati comes close to what we might call incorporation, in the way that it brings events into our corporeal being.

In modern Mindfulness Interventions, we might see this in the way that we are constantly invited to bring attention to bodily sensations that emerge with events, emotions, or thoughts.

So, the idea of sati incorporates a range of meanings that include issues of attention and issues of memory, rooted in a foundational notion of non-dualism between mind and body – we return to both at once and as one.

Since the earliest sutta (scripture), the canonical concept of sati appears as one of the key qualities that must be cultivated on the path to Awakening (or Enlightenment), which is the goal of Buddhist training. Indeed, it is one of the five basic faculties (alongside faith, vigor, concentration, and wisdom), and it features (alongside right concentration) as one of the steps in the Eightfold Path. Here, the idea of cultivating ‘right mindfulness’ seems to suggest that there is also the possibility of ‘wrong mindfulness,’ which is something that will trouble people (and us) later on. It troubles me all the time ...

One thing that makes this issue more confusing today is the way that some Pali terms that are used in Buddhism to denote clarity or clarification – seeing things as they really are – (such as *sampajanna*) are often also translated as ‘Mindfulness.’ This has led to confusion and debates about the extent to which Mindful awareness incorporates forms of discrimination and judgement, or whether it is a form of ‘bare’ or ‘pure’ awareness. In the context of Buddhism, at least, it is clear that sati works together with allied concepts like *sampajanna* (discrimination) and *appamada* (conscientiousness) to inform ‘right Mindfulness’ or *samma sati*.

The earliest and most influential treatment of sati, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, seeks to elaborate the meaning and practice of sati through four kinds of meditation. You can read it for yourself in the course materials for this module, but in an iconic passage at the very start of the sutta, these are outlined by the Buddha in basic terms: he explains to his *bhikkhus* (followers) that these four foundations of mindfulness constitute a complete path

for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, and for reaching the right path and attaining Awakening.

When he is asked what these four might be, the Buddha replies concisely: first, we must live observing the body as a body – by being ardent, fully knowing and mindful of the body in this way, we can overcome our covetousness, longing, and discontents with the world.



- body
- feelings
- thoughts
- mental events

Then, continuing in a similar manner, by observing feelings as feelings, thoughts as thoughts, mental events as mental events etc., and by doing this with ardent discipline and attention, we can overcome our covetousness, longing, and discontents with the world.

To some extent, this description should sound relatively familiar from the last module about construct Mindfulness in MBSR, MBCT, and other Mindfulness-Based Interventions. It seems plausible that practicing these four foundations of sati could involve exercises that resemble, say, the four-stage open-awareness practices found in many of these Mindfulness Interventions today (and which you will encounter in our meditation labs).

The rest of the sutta contains elaborations of various exercises we might perform in order to address these four foundations of sati. For instance, in order to cultivate our capacity to live observing our body as a body: we might bring our attention to the physical sensations of breathing; or we might bring our attention to the physical sensations that accompany walking, standing, sitting or lying down; or we might observe what happens to our bodies when we perform even the most trivial everyday activities (eating and drinking, chewing and swallowing, defecating and urinating); or we might train our attention on what our body would be like as a corpse, in various stages of decay.

If you're thinking that this last exercise seems importantly different from the others, I think I agree with you – and we'll return to it in a moment.

In order to cultivate our capacity to live observing mental events as mental events: we might keep vigil for the emergence of hindrances and obstacles to our capacity to remain mindful (such

as lust, sloth, torpor, excitement, doubt); we might observe how our mind becomes caught or distracted by different mental events and objects ... and so on.

In other words, the cultivation of the four foundations of sati require us to exert our discipline to pay attention to all the things we would usually not notice in the performance of everyday activities. This means everything that happens inside our mind-body and everything that happens outside it too, until eventually we deconstruct ourselves into the constant parade of experiential phenomena themselves, and we adopt the standpoint of an observer watching and contemplating that parade.

Because this standpoint reveals to us the arising of all things – including suffering itself – it is closely associated with the standpoint of wisdom.

In this way, the accomplishment of what we called a metacognitive standpoint in MBSR and MBCT also becomes associated with the attainment of a form of non-self (anatta/anatman) in Buddhism. This association of metacognition or meta-awareness with the vanishing of the conventional self is, in general, not carried over into scientific, therapeutic, or clinical interventions today. Indeed, as we saw in the last module, to some extent the possibility of this encounter with the non-self is seen as a risk factor in some populations.

One of the most important lessons here involves the way that our own transience and impermanence is revealed to us as we watch the parade of phenomena rising and falling. And the Satipatthana Sutta is not subtle in the way that it encourages us to realise this lesson. Unlike the ‘open awareness’ meditations of MBSR and MBCT, here the meditator is explicitly directed towards images of her own death and decay.

This not only serves a didactic function – teaching that we (as a whole) are no different from the parade of transient events and phenomena that we observe passing around and within us – but it is also a form of visualization mediation which itself provokes sensations, thoughts, and mental events that we then need to observe in the same ardent, disciplined way.

Hence, it provides an opportunity for us to become mindful of death itself, even while we live, folding this mindfulness back into the observed and felt transience of each breath, each drop of rain, each twinge of pain from our knee. It is partially in this way that the idea of 'right Mindfulness' becomes associated with compassion and non-attachment.

In general, of course, MBCT and MBSR-like Mindfulness Interventions are rather ambivalent about visualizations, but when they are used they are most often used as devices to assist in shifting our condition of emotional arousal by turning our attention to beautiful, peaceful, calm, or persistent images: lakes, rivers, mountains and so on. You'll encounter some of these in our meditation labs.

To some extent, then, we can see that the tone of visualization appears to reveal an important gap between Buddhist sati and construct Mindfulness.

So, now that we have a sense of the origins of sati and its foundations, as well as the contours of its basic relationship with our modern 'construct Mindfulness,' it's time to take a look at how it relates to some other Buddhist practices. In the next session, we'll consider vipassana (insight meditation) and samatha (calm-abiding meditation).



3.2. *Vipassana & Samatha*

It has become rather commonplace in discussions of Buddhist meditation today to draw a distinction between two basic kinds. The first is often described as ‘concentration,’ or ‘single-pointed,’ or sometimes ‘calm-abiding’ meditation. This is what is usually meant when we use the Pali term samatha.

And the second is most often referred to as ‘insight’ or sometimes ‘clear seeing’ meditation, and this corresponds (more-or-less) with the Pali term vipassana. For various reasons, the practice and accomplishment of Mindfulness today is usually associated with vipassana, and sometimes exclusively with vipassana, as though the cultivation of sati (which we considered in the last session) is entirely separate from the development of single-pointed concentration.

While this division between concentration and insight is convenient and helps us to understand two different trajectories in the style, tone, and purpose of meditation, it is not clear that samatha and vipassana are really so simply or crisply distinct. Once again, this is a distinction that we might see in terms of ideal types rather than actual practices: we imagine the possibility of

pure samatha or pure vipassana practices precisely so that we have a clearer image of particular tendencies rather than because such purity is really possible.

Likewise, the assertion of a direct or exclusive association between vipassana and the cultivation of sati seems to be more problematic in practice than is often appreciated. One of the reasons for this is that the Satipatthana Sutta, which we considered in the last session, makes little attempt to draw a distinction between concentration and insight. The idea of two separate paths of meditation seems to arise in the commentaries and interpretations of the sutta, rather than in the sutta themselves.

There appear to be at least two ways in which concentration and insight interact with and rely on each other in the cultivation of sati.

The first is simply that our ability to hold an event or sensation in mind seems to rely on our capacity for focus and concentration on that event or sensation.

Perhaps you will remember from the last session that the Satipatthana Sutta called on us to be ardent and disciplined about keeping our attention properly located? Indeed, the way in which our insight into what arises in moments of Mindful awareness seems to rest upon our capacity for concentration is one of the reasons why some commentators suggest that Mindfulness is a form of wisdom or transformative knowledge (*panna/prajna*) that builds upon meditative concentration (*samadhi*) as a more advanced stage of practice.

Whatever the case, it does seem to be plausible that the cultivation of samatha (concentration) will enrich and deepen our capacity for sati (mindfulness) and our practice of vipassana (insight).

The second way in which these paths seem to interact places them on more equal footing, making them into two aspects of a common enterprise. For instance, it seems to be the case that the practice of the four foundations of sati (that we considered in the last session), can themselves constitute a form of concentration meditation, leading to a state of calm-abiding.

That is, just as in the performance of samatha meditations, the cultivation of mindfulness might be measured by our progressive accomplishment of the four jhana (or stages) of absorption that lead eventually to a condition of perfect equanimity and awareness.

So, what does this mean?

In more simple terms, it means that the cultivation of sati enables the possibility that whatever we observe arising into our awareness (in our bodies, our emotions, our minds etc.) ... whatever we observe arising can itself become the focus of a single-pointed, calm-abiding form of meditation within the practice as a whole.



For instance, you might perform a mindfulness of body exercise and notice the arising of the sensation of pain in your knee; having noticed all the various ways in which this sensation ripples out into other thoughts and feelings, this bare experience of pain might then occupy all of your attention in deeper and deeper ways until this quality of absorption acts transformatively to bring about a form of awakening.

In some traditions, this idea that mindfulness of the body can contain within it a complete pathway to awakening is extended into the performance of practices like yoga or qi-gong, and is then even connected with the accomplishment of magical or yogic powers (such as levitating, flying, or walking on water etc.).

In other words, in practice, it's not clear that the cultivation of sati relies exclusively on vipassana practices, nor that vipassana and samatha can be differentiated in absolute terms in practice. Instead, it might be helpful to recognise that these concepts emerged in the period of pre-sectarian Buddhism, before many of the commentaries and interpretations of different emergent schools and sects began the formal work of building distinct traditions.

An important modern tradition that has been extremely influential on the development and popularization of Mindfulness around the world has been the so-called 'Vipassana Movement' or 'Insight Meditation Movement,' which originates in the work of two Burmese teachers in the mid-Twentieth Century and is now the basis of many teaching centres in the USA and elsewhere. Leading

voices in the West include Jack Kornfield, Joseph Golstein, and Sharon Salzberg.

It is the language of this movement that has most powerfully sculpted the contemporary discourse about Mindfulness and moved the idea of vipassana practice closer to the model of an ideal type. In brief, this approach emphasises the cultivation of a form of non-linguistic ‘noting’ of mental events as they arise, encouraging practitioners to experientially narrate each element of their experiences as they happen.

While the Vipassana Movement has not gone as far along the road to instrumentalization as what we have seen as construct Mindfulness, it has moved in a non-sectarian direction and is frequently associated with the provision of secular mindfulness training for general populations who are seeking help to deal with various forms of dukkha (dis-ease). Indeed, the Vipassana Movement allows for a difference between ‘elementary mindfulness’ (which approximately corresponds with the cultivation of a secular skill or technology) and a more religiously motivated ‘right mindfulness’ (which locates such cultivation in the context of the Eight-Fold Path, as we saw in the last session).

This potential distinction between elementary and right mindfulness really helps us to understand one of the ways in which construct Mindfulness differs fundamentally from Buddhist sati: while Buddhist sati must be embedded within an overall practice that moves progressively through the cultivation of proper moral conduct, the cultivation of deep states of meditative absorption, and then the accomplishment of a wise understanding of the nature of reality (indeed, these are the three broad-brush stages of the Eight-Fold Path), construct Mindfulness posits that the practice of mindfulness can be extracted from this overall pathway and cultivated on its own with a number of measurable benefits.

One of the other ways in which the contemporary, scientific, construct of Mindfulness seeks to position itself in this complicated landscape is by emphasising the possibility of making use of the ideal-type distinctions between samatha and vipassana to indicate a certain tone of practice.

That is, MBSR and MBCT Interventions typically invite practitioners to adopt an open and permissive attitude to the

arising of sensations and mental events. While there is a concerted effort, when our attention wanders, to keep bringing it back to whatever it is we intend to observe (our body, sounds, thoughts or whatever), this effort is coloured with the warmth of an invitation rather than a command.

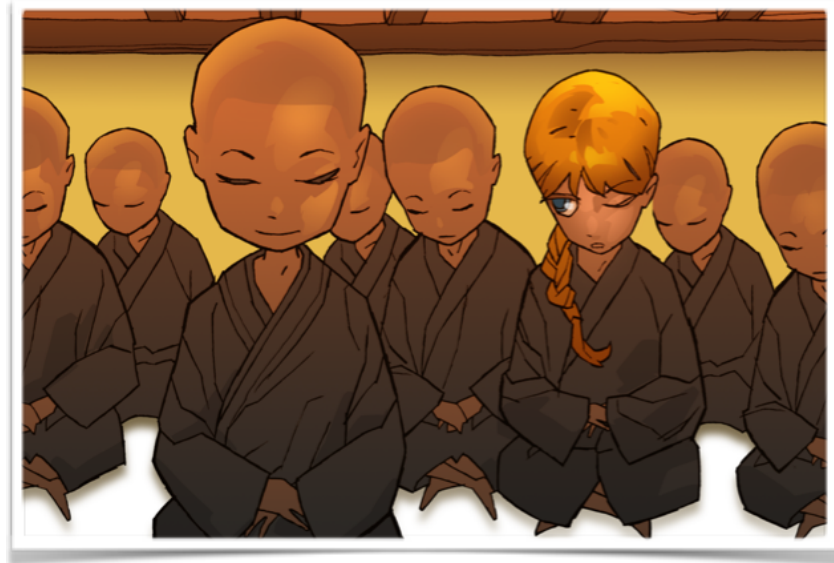
Hence, construct Mindfulness is often characterised in terms of opening to whatever is present and allowing whatever arises to arise. It is in this way that practitioners can be told that we are not doing anything wrong (and certainly not failing in the practice) if our minds wander off – the practice resides in inviting the attention back once it has gone. In MBSR and MBCT, the importance of ensuring that vulnerable populations are not exposed to a new set of reasons to feel like failures is itself one of the reasons for interpreting Mindfulness in this way.

In this particular context, the idea of samatha meditation is sometimes used as a foil to emphasise the appropriate attitude for construct Mindfulness. Unlike Mindfulness, we say, which is characterised by an attitude of allowing and opening, concentration meditations are characterised by the feeling of narrowing and closing. Rather than being gently curious about whatever arises and then compassionately attentive to this arising of myriad events, concentration meditations are about commanding the attention and excluding distractions. In a concentration practice, once your mind wanders, you've failed and you must start again.

A very simple example (that is often used to make this point) is a breath-counting meditation, in which we focus our attention on our breath and count these breaths in cycles of 9. If/when our mind wanders from our breath (distracted by any sensation, thought, or feeling that may arise), then we must start again at one. The idea is that we can measure our progress very directly and literally by seeing how many counts we can do before we fail. Someone who gets to 9 four times is better at the exercise than someone who struggles to get to the number 2 even once.

As we've seen, this kind of attitude of competitive measurement and striving is exactly the kind of thing we're trying to avoid in modern Mindfulness interventions. However, we've also seen that these kinds of characterization of samatha and vipassana are close to being caricatures developed for reasons of illustration.

So, now that we have a sense of the meaning of sati (Buddhist Mindfulness) and its relationship with two major approaches to meditation practice – vipassana (insight) and samatha (concentration/absorption) – in our next session we're going to take a look at how a different Buddhist tradition, Zen, might help us to understand each of these a little more deeply.



3.3. Zen

Many of the ideas and principles we have considered in the last two sessions about Buddhism have been drawn from the so-called Theravada Tradition of Buddhism, which is the tradition historically found mostly in South and Southeast Asia, focussed on the ancient Pali canon. In fact, the majority of Buddhists today would probably identify themselves with the other major Buddhist 'vehicle,' so-called Mahayana Buddhism, which has been associated mostly with East Asia. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism – a type of Vajrayana – is usually seen as a subset of Mahayana.

In this session today we're going to take a brief look at what happens to the concept and practice of Mindfulness in the Mahayana tradition, focussing in particular on its formation within Zen (partially due to its interactions with Daoism in China). As we've already seen in previous sessions, Japanese Zen had a major impact on representations of Buddhism and Mindfulness in the West, especially in the period after WWII through to the 1980s, and today these representations are rather muddled and blurred into other traditions.

One of the major Buddhist themes that is emphasised with great clarity in the Zen tradition is the idea that much of human suffering is caused by faulty ways of looking at the world around us. That is, our way of observing and understanding the world is one of the causes of our suffering in it.

As we'll see in the next session, this diagnosis was shared by the early Daoists in China, who argued that true insight into how things really are is obscured by the artifice, cleverness, and cultivated rationality of human civilization. Humanity literally divorces itself from its true nature through the exercise of wilful, instrumental reason. Because of our preoccupation with doing, we forget how to be. Hence the only way to see through to the truth of the world is for us to shed our clever discriminations and judgements and just allow reality as it really is to arise within and around us.



Partially in dialogue with ideas like this, Chan/Zen Buddhism expounded the position that the human mind is naturally pristine and clear – indeed, that all humans (or even all life) contain the perfected Buddha-nature itself – but that our minds are clouded, sullied, and distorted by delusional discriminations and judgements that we incorporate as we live our lives.

Our ordinary, everyday way of thinking distracts us from (and prevents us from seeing) the truth of things. This doctrine of the Tathagatagarbha (ie. that the essence of our mind is always and already the Buddha Nature) is associated with the controversial idea of ‘original enlightenment.’

While apparently quite different from the frameworks for practice that we have looked at in our last couple of sessions, Zen meditation practices also emphasize a form of mindfulness (nen, jp.). The basics of such practices involve allowing mental events and activities to arise and pass without involving ourselves with them by engaging thoughts, judgements or discriminations about them. Such discriminations are the activities of our everyday, deluded mind.

A common saying about this is: there’s nothing wrong with thoughts coming to visit, just don’t invite them in for tea.

*There's nothing
wrong with
thoughts coming
to visit, just don't
invite them in for
tea*

By allowing such mental events to pass without inviting them in or engaging with them, such events eventually settle and cease by themselves. And, as such disturbances cease, so our mind settles into peace. What is left is the undisturbed mind or the True Mind – like an unsullied and pristine surface of water – perfectly reflective – which we experience as our intrinsically pure nature. This is right mindfulness (shōnen), and it is this that we should cultivate and protect during meditation practices.

Perhaps the most iconic meditation practices in Zen Buddhism are zazen, which is really a broad term to include various forms of ‘sitting-zen’ or ‘sitting meditation’ (which is all it means), and the more specific shikantaza.

Shikantaza is closely associated with the Japanese monk Dōgen and the Sōtō school that he originated in the Thirteenth Century. Dōgen emphasised shikantaza – or ‘just sitting practice’ (or nothing but meditation) – as a form of silent illumination. Unlike other schools of Buddhism and even other schools of Zen, Dōgen insisted that ‘just sitting’ should be enough as a practice, without the need for supplementary activities.

In practice, shikantaza shares much in common with those practices we saw in the Satipatthana Sutta in earlier sessions. And, just like we saw in the case of the cultivation of sati, so it is also the case that shikantaza seems to incorporate elements of both the samatha (concentration) and vipassana (insight) pathways.

In general, shikantaza is less structured than sati-practices, and certainly less structured than we see in modern Mindfulness Interventions like MBSR and MBCT, where a teacher carefully guides us through various foundations of mindfulness (as you’ve experienced in our meditation labs). Shikantaza is typically silent, and practitioners discipline themselves to observe whatever arises from (what we have called) a metacognitive or meta-aware standpoint.

One of the controversial issues arising from this kind of practice (and some of those we’ve considered in earlier sessions) is the way in which judgement and discrimination appear to be seen as irredeemable problems for humans.

That is, the endpoint of the practice is the dropping away of mind and body themselves in the accomplishment of freedom from the arising of events and phenomena (which constitute suffering). As we saw earlier, this sounds like the attainment of a form of non-self or non-mind (*mushin* – jp.), which may be a wonderful spiritual destination, but which might not be suitable as a goal in modern, therapeutic contexts.

Given Zen's unusually powerful and explicit emphasis on the realization of this 'original enlightenment' or True Mind, it has also found itself at the heart of many controversies.

In Zen, it is not only the case that right Mindfulness enables us to operate more skilfully from a more spacious standpoint of meta-awareness; in Zen there is also the sense that the objects of awareness are themselves delusions or blemishes that should be polished away.

Hence, an important controversy concerns how we can sustain morality if all our judgements (even our moral judgements) are delusions – if we should not discriminate between good and bad (because the act of discrimination already involves us in an unnatural attachment to events and phenomena, which is therefore bad in itself), how can we act well?

In other words, what is the connection between 'right Mindfulness' and moral action? How can this concept and practice of Mindfulness contribute to improving society around us?

Of course, Zen has all kinds of answers to these questions, many of which appeal directly to the experience of 'right Mindfulness' itself. In a manner that we will also see in the context of Daoism in the next session, Zen literature is full of appeals to the inadequacy of language (and discriminatory reason) to account for what is found in the site of right Mindfulness or non-self. The only way we can know about it is to experience it.

As we've already seen, this appeal to the essential value of experiential knowledge is central to all the systems of Mindfulness that we have encountered, including construct Mindfulness itself. In our next session, we'll take the step to consider a non-Buddhist tradition in the form of Daoism, to see how that might enrich our understanding of the meaning and practice of Mindfulness today.



3.4. Daoism

As we've seen in the last few sessions, the connections between construct Mindfulness and various traditions of Buddhism are very powerful. Indeed, accepting the vagaries and creativities involved in translation and then operationalization, there is a case to be made that modern Mindfulness emerges from the concepts and practices associated with the Pali term *sati*. Nonetheless, just as we saw in the case of Buddhism, it seems to make sense for us to look more widely than those texts or traditions that use the word *sati* in order to explore how more diverse thinkers and practitioners have sought to make sense of something that might resemble it.

In other words, as we saw in the first session of this module, it is probably a mistake to assume that the historical occurrence of a particular word describes the full extent of the philosophical resources that might be of use to us in understanding a concept or practice today.

One of the most natural places for us to look for such resources regarding Mindfulness might be in the philosophy of Daoism, which began to emerge in China in about the fourth or third centuries BCE, thus approximately coinciding with the

formulation of the Pali canon in India. We have already seen how the interaction of Buddhism and Daoism in China influenced the emergence of Chan (or Zen) Buddhism there. However, just as with Buddhism, we're not primarily concerned here with the historical development of the rituals and dogma associated with Daoism, but simply with some of the core ideas that seem especially relevant to Mindfulness today.

In other words, what can we learn from Daoism that might be of value to our understanding and practice of Mindfulness?

Looking back to one of the foundational texts of Daoism – the Dao De Jing – we quickly find descriptions of the relationship between human beings and the world around them that resonate closely with those already familiar to us from Mindfulness.

In particular, early philosophical Daoism draws our attention to the idea that it is in our awareness of the world – rather than necessarily in the objective conditions of the world itself – that our suffering and dis-ease really begins. Hence, rather than waging war or engaging in violence to bring about an end to conditions that we dislike, we should instead seek a form of internal equilibrium of consciousness that will help us to think and act more skilfully.

The Dao De Jing talks about this kind of awareness as a way of experiencing what is special about a particular event by simultaneously experiencing that single event in the context of the whole. Rather than cultivating a narrow conceptual focus, it calls on us to view events and mental events in as broad and spacious a manner as possible, stepping back from them (and opening up to them) to give us space to recognise the way in which the particular should move in accordance with the general or universal.

Vitally, this kind of holistic awareness – which the texts often gloss as our awareness of the inextricability of the one and the many – is always immediate and direct, both spatially and temporally (both in terms of space and time). That is, proper awareness of the world is always our awareness of the here and now, and of the context of this 'here and now' as the one amongst the many.

The cultivation of this kind of awareness is the beginning of the possibility of living with a kind of skilful, creative, and productive harmony with/in this world.

While this is not identical to what we have been calling Mindfulness in previous sessions, perhaps we can see how there's a sense in which this form of awareness (with its emphasis on the establishment of a broad, open, inclusive standpoint oriented around direct, immediate experience) is at least allied to (and interesting for) Mindfulness. It sounds similar.

Perhaps the most famous and influential concepts from philosophical Daoism are what are sometimes called the wu-forms, where the Chinese character wu stands for a form of negation or nothingness. For instance, many of you will already know the (much misunderstood) term wuwei – non-action – which might better be understood as a form of non-coercive action. But since we're interested primarily in questions of awareness today, we should give a little more attention to the concept of wuzhi – non-thought or non-knowledge. Indeed, the historical record suggests that 'mindfulness' (sati) was first translated into Chinese using wuwei and wuzhi.

無為

The everyday meaning of the word wuzhi is simply 'ignorance,' and the reasons for this are interesting for us:

All of the wu-forms rest upon the premise that humans spend a lot of our time and energy engaged with abstract concepts and mediated experiences created by artificial (ie. invented) technical knowledge. That is, instead of engaging with the world directly, we engage with a kind veneer – a construction – that has been spread over the top of it by human cleverness, separating us from the world as it really is and preventing us from touching it directly. If you like: it sanitizes our connection with nature like a window. This means that our experience of the world is transformed – or even perverted – by the ways that our cognitive processes work to keep reality away from us. Even worse, we use up a great deal of our energy (and health) struggling to deal with these cognitive fabrications rather than with the world itself.

Perhaps you'll recognise elements of this model of experience and awareness from our earlier sessions about Buddhism?

One of the key insights in Daoism, however, is not so much about freeing ourselves from suffering by seeing through a layer of delusion (that itself causes us so much unnecessary pain), rather it's about seeing through to how things really are so that we can think

and act more skilfully. Here, the idea of ‘being skilful’ involves thinking and acting in a way that is naturally harmonious with the whole (and the real) picture. It involves cultivating the ability mentally to stand back from ourselves into a more spacious and open standpoint, to see directly, free of mediation and abstraction (including the abstractions of our own desires and theories), and to see how a particular event or phenomenon is an aspect of a universal, organic whole.

That is, this quality of attention and awareness not only liberates from suffering, but it also makes us into better people – both more skilful in thoughts and activities, and more ethical in our behaviours.

Again, I suspect you might recognise elements of this model from our earlier discussions of Buddhism, and especially of Zen Buddhism in the last session. Indeed, without wanting to force it, I wonder whether we might see ways in which these Daoist ideas about wuzhi (non-thought) might be similar to Buddhist ideas about right Mindfulness. One of the fascinating differences is how Daoism plays with the way in which this form of attention and awareness is not only about seeing clearly, but also about forgetting (or even jettisoning) the cognitive patterns that we associate with cleverness and morality everyday. That is, to a certain extent, wuzhi embraces the idea (and the language) of ignorance – the beginners mind, the uncarved block and so on – as the proper goal of our cultivation.



And if this sounds rather anti-social (or perhaps anti-cultural) to you, then you might be right. There is a real sense in philosophical Daoism that human civilization per se might be the origin of all our suffering, clumsiness, and immorality. Humans are maladapted to their own civilizations. Institutionalized human cleverness (or ‘civilization’!) is precisely that layer of veneer that prevents us from directly accessing reality. It conditions us from the day we’re born to think in terms of categories, discriminations, and judgements that (pre)occupy our attention in place of direct experiences of the world around us. Our civilizations condition us to devalue our direct experience (as primitive and naïve) and to privilege abstract, reasoned interpretations of that experience in its place. Hence, there’s a sense in which the cultivation of Mindfulness – or wuzhi – is an attempt to free ourselves from the confines of (the idea of)

society itself. Indeed, the social implications of early Daoist philosophy are the subject of great debate and controversy. We'll look at some of these issues in the next module.

Like the Buddhists, Daoists have always been very much aware that this kind of insight pushes inquirers right to the edges of the possibilities of language and reason to express (since language and reason are themselves artefacts of society). Hence, the language of texts like the Dao De Jing is full of contradictions and paradoxes – they often seem poetic rather than systematic – just as we see in many Zen texts. And, just like many Buddhist texts, these Daoists place primary emphasis on the importance of experiential knowledge as the only way to see through to the truth.

Hence, wuzhi, like right Mindfulness, is not something you can accomplish by (for instance) listening to me explain it to you. Instead, you need to cultivate it yourself in various formal exercises (like meditations or qi gong or the martial arts) and in the way you live your life everyday. Looking ahead to our next session (on Stoicism), we might see wuzhi as a concept that relies upon the practice of spiritual exercises.

So, while it is clear that wuzhi is not identical with Mindfulness, I wonder whether you think that it has enough common ground to make comparing them helpful or fruitful or interesting? In particular, it's worth taking some time to consider how an understanding Daoist philosophy might help us to make sense of some of the questions we might have about our Mindfulness practice. In particular, when we seek direct or bare experience in Mindfulness meditations, to what extent are we shedding our own mal-adaptive responses to (mental) events, and to what extent are we (perhaps also) shedding the mal-adaptive conditioning of society itself?

In our next session, we're going to take another step even further away from Buddhism and Asia to consider how and whether the spiritual exercises of the Stoics might relate to Mindfulness.



3.5. Stoicism

In today's session, we're going to be a little more provocative and suggest that we can gain meaningful and valuable insights into the idea and practice of Mindfulness (today) from traditions of thought that enjoyed little (or no) interaction with Buddhism at all. Today, we're going to experiment a little with Ancient Greece and Stoicism.

When we talk about Stoicism, what we are talking about? In general, we're talking about the philosophical movement that emerged in the work of Zeno (3-4th century BCE) and was then developed by Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius (1-2nd century CE).

Unlike many other philosophical movements, which treat philosophy as a theoretical abstraction or even as a curious pastime, the Stoics understood philosophy primarily as a form of practice, or as a way of life. Philosophy is a kind of exercise (*askêsis*) in which we engage in order to make ourselves into better people. The premise here is that once we properly understand what the world is really like, we will find ourselves completely transformed. This self-transformation arises from the way that Stoicism brings together philosophical inquiry into the nature of things and psychological discipline and commitment to live in accord with that nature.

Hence, classic texts of the Stoic tradition, such as the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, are often mixtures of philosophical exploration and psychological instruction – explaining what kinds of exercises the author practices in order to live more closely in accord with the principles of nature, and often showing how the author reproaches himself for failing to fully incorporate (that is, bring into his body) the principles that he has reasoned to be true. In this way, Stoicism emerges with a strongly therapeutic aspect, not only for its readers but also for the authors of the classical texts.

Like the Buddhists and the Daoists, the Stoics disdain those philosophers who imagine that their ideas and their lives are different things. Instead, they imagine the ideal sage as one whose philosophy is most perfectly expressed in their intentions and actions everyday. Philosophy is a way of life, not an abstract or purely academic pursuit. Indeed, the idea that philosophy can be abstracted from life is not only ethically dangerous but also nonsense – philosophy that isn't embodied just isn't philosophy. A philosopher who doesn't make his/her arguments with their being is simply failing to make their argument at all.

*Stoicism is basic to
Cognitive
Behavioural
Therapy (CBT)*

This emphasis on practice and incorporation (the bringing into the body) and self-transformation through cognitive discipline is basic to the concept of Mindfulness, as we've seen in many sessions. Indeed, it's also basic to the discipline of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in general, and there is powerful evidence that the founders of CBT (including, therefore, MBCT) were strongly influenced by Stoicism, and there is increasing interest in it for this reason.

One of the most often cited Stoic maxims in the literature of CBT is this line from Epictetus (*Enchiridion*, 5): 'Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views that they take of them.'

It's possible that this simple maxim might sound familiar to you from module two, in which we explored therapeutic deployments of Mindfulness as a technique to intervene in the way we attribute meaning to our experiences by opening ourselves to the possibility of direct or pure experience.

It's also possible that this idea might sound familiar to you from the earlier sessions of this module, in which we saw how various types of Buddhism and Daoism attribute a great deal of human

suffering to the ways in which we inflict unnecessary pain on ourselves through our attachments (desires) and aversions (fears), and through rumination on these. We could save ourselves a great deal of suffering if we could awaken to the way things really are and deal with them in their own terms – we are not disturbed by things themselves, but by the views we take on them.

On the face of it, then, there do seem to be some important and interesting points of contact between Stoicism and Mindfulness, especially in their practical orientations and their therapeutic aspects. Indeed, it also seems, at least at first glance, that they might participate in similar epistemologies (theories of knowledge) and similar ethical standpoints.

In particular, Stoicism appears to invest in the idea that our greatest obstacle to flourishing and virtuousness is our imperfect ability to properly understand the world as it really is – our understanding is constantly being sullied and perverted by our ‘excessive impulses’ (ie. passions or emotions such as appetite (pleasure) and fear (distress)), and by our tendency to ruminate on these and lose sight of the world. Indeed, the characteristic Stoic prescription for a life of flourishing and virtue (ie. a life without suffering), is to ‘live in agreement with nature’ or, in the words of Chrysippus (died 206bce), to live ‘in accordance with the experience of what happens by nature.’



So, rather than trying to impose our will onto the world, virtue and flourishing result from observing the world properly (a quality the Stoics sometimes call ‘watchfulness’), ascertaining how the world will develop (because of the nature of the world itself), and then acting in accordance with (rather than attempting to resist or overcome) that natural flow.

It follows from this position that some of the things that we value – health, money, status, even happiness – are not in themselves the good. Indeed, the Stoics call them the ‘indifferents,’ which we can prefer when all other things are equal, but which should not motivate our actions if we seek to live well. And living well means living in agreement with nature by cultivating a kind of watchfulness about how the universe works, including by engaging in various practices and exercises to cultivate this insight.

For the Stoics, one of our most common problems is that our emotions cloud our ability to watch the world properly, causing us to act on opinion (which means that we assent to false impressions) rather than on the basis of true agreement with nature (which would involve assenting to true impressions). Emotions and opinions lead us to make false value judgements and ethical errors, leading to the suffering of ourselves and others, even if we are unaware of this.

One of the ways in which Stoics suggest that we can differentiate between false judgements and true judgements is by the way they feel to us: unlike Plato and others who asserted that our thinking happens only in our heads, the Stoics maintained that our commanding faculty is actually in our hearts. Hence, they suggest that when we pay attention properly we can feel when our opinion is mobilized by fear or aversion because there are sensations of contraction and shrinkage in our bodies; when our opinions are mobilized by desire or delight there are sensations of expansion and swelling.



In other words, proper watchfulness for the Stoics not only involves paying careful attention to the external world around us in order to see clearly the relationship between the one and the many, the particular and the universal, the instance and the system, but it also involves bringing careful attention to the internal sensations that co-arise with these events, which can be felt bodily as vital elements in our awareness of the whole.

While this account of watchfulness might sound rather a lot like Mindfulness, we need to be a little careful about trying to force these concepts too closely together. In fact, they rely on radically different trajectories of the meaning and integrity of human selfhood:

As we've seen, Mindfulness in Buddhism and Daoism rests upon our ability to allow our rationality and discriminatory faculties to fall away, hence revealing a form of pristine reality unsullied by our desires and fears.

On the other hand, while watchfulness in Stoicism also includes a shedding of excessive impulses (passions and emotions) in order to enable a clear view of things as they really are (which is sometimes called the cultivation of apathy), Stoics are absolutely clear that our

ability to properly perceive, understand, and act upon what we find in that state relies entirely upon our command of reason and rationality. Rather than being one of the obstacles that must be cast aside in order to get down to things as they really are, our rationality and our discriminatory faculties (unclouded by excessive impulses) are the basis of our human nature and thus of our proper place in the world.

Hence, while the Stoics were often disruptive elements in ancient societies, because they challenged the specific hierarchies of values of those societies (disparaging health, wealth, and power as legitimate goals of human flourishing and instead showing them to be obstacles to human virtue and genuine happiness), unlike the Daoists they did not challenge the very idea of human civilization per se.

While the Daoists and some of the Buddhists (especially in Zen) saw the cultivation and progression of rationality in human society as a process of human decline from our essential nature as a spontaneous and intuitive element of the natural order, the Stoics saw the development and refinement of rationality as a process of uncovering and deepening man's natural place in the world. For the Daoists and Buddhists, the natural world of which humans should be Mindful is an organic and fluid place of impermanence and change, resistant to rational explanation because reason arises later as an artefact within it. For the Stoics, the natural world is a fully rational expression of a rational God, and living in harmony with it requires cultivating our own rationality through progressively refined watchfulness and reason.

In the end, then, it's clear that while there appear to be some intriguing similarities, there are also some important and significant differences between Stoicism and the kinds of Mindfulness that we have associated with Buddhism and Daoism. And this should not be surprising, given the radically different contexts in which these traditions emerged and developed. However, given that we have seen contemporary 'construct Mindfulness' as a continuously developing concept that draws upon ideas and resources because of their utility for particular populations (rather than because of their historical continuity with Buddhism), it is worth taking some time to think about how you feel about issues like rationality, discrimination, value-judgement

and the principles of the natural world. Perhaps contemporary Mindfulness can make use of Stoicism to help some people to find greater resonance with it?

In our next session, we're going to flash forward in time to the turn of the twentieth century in the USA to see how an influential modern philosopher and psychologist, William James, has grappled with some of these questions about grounding the study of consciousness and awareness and mindfulness in modernity.



3.6. Modernity & Mindfulness

In the previous sessions of this module, we've been interested in exploring the emergence and development of the concept of sati in Buddhism and then the various ways in which other concepts (such as wuwei in Daoism or watchfulness in Stoicism) might relate to, differ from, and enrich our understanding of Mindfulness today.

In today's session, we're going to take a brief look at the work of one of the founders of modern psychology – William James (1842-1910) – who is also one of the founders of philosophical pragmatism. Given the way that 'construct Mindfulness' has emerged in the 20th century at the interface between Psychology and Philosophy, it seems especially appropriate to be aware of James and some of his contributions to this space.

At that time, James seems able to move relatively freely between ideas about objective and subjective knowledge, between notions of material empiricism and what he calls radical empiricism, and he also seems more than happy to make use of different concepts, ideas, and experiences from round the world in the construction of his own models of understanding. In particular, he is clear that religious experiences from various traditions should be seen as valuable sources of insight into the nature of the self, and hence folded into the disciplines of Psychology and Philosophy. That is, for James, experience was the most important and legitimate

source of knowledge, no matter from where that experience arose. This openness to varieties of experience – ranging from the mundane and the religious – was framed as a form of pragmatism.

This emphasis on the foundational (and functional) importance of our experience of the world (rather than on the idea that the world has some kind of objective reality beyond (or despite) our experience of it) might resonate with some of you as similar to ideas we discussed in Buddhism and Daoism. In fact, there are quite a few ways in which James seems to address some of the issues we've encountered with Mindfulness, and many contemporary scientists refer to his work as a way of framing the problems of Mindfulness in modern, scientific terms.

One of the terms with which James can help us is 'consciousness,' since this was at the core of his concerns, and it has re-emerged as a hot topic in many experimental fields today including cognitive neuroscience. Indeed, today, Mindfulness is often included within the broader category of the 'Consciousness Disciplines,' rendering it into a method of inquiry into the problem of consciousness itself.

*consciousness
disciplines
and the hard
problem of
consciousness*

This so-called 'problem of consciousness,' which re-surfaced powerfully in the work of David Chalmers in the mid-1990s, is really the problem of whether it's possible for us to understand what consciousness is by observing it scientifically from the outside – from a kind of third person perspective. Or whether there is something about consciousness that means it resists this kind of objective attention; that is, whether consciousness means what it feels like to be something (or to be in a particular state). As Thomas Nagel famously asked: can we know what it's like to be a bat without being a bat? This would make consciousness into an inalienably subjective, first person phenomenon that can only be understood through our personal experience of it.

We have already seen in module 2 that part of the reason for scientific interest in Mindfulness (and Buddhist psychology more generally) today is because of the possibility that it helps us to get to grips with this 'hard problem of consciousness' by introducing a new form of inquiry via the practice of Mindfulness Meditation.

In fact, James was already investigating the possibilities of subjective knowledge and consciousness in the 1890s. Building on

*introspection
and
observation
as forms of
empiricism*

the work of Wilhelm Wundt, he explored the idea of ‘introspection’ as a form of scientific inquiry into consciousness, arguing that introspection (or in-sight or looking within ourselves) produced a reliable form of empirical data – indeed, that it was actually the only way to get valid data about consciousness. He saw it as a form of observation, like external observation of the material world, but directed inwardly into the self.

Introspective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. The word introspection need hardly be defined – it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover. Everyone agrees that we there discover states of consciousness. (William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1890.)

Perhaps you’re already noticing that this kind of description of the method of introspection sounds quite similar to descriptions of the methods of Mindfulness. Indeed we often talk about Mindfulness as a form of in-sight, as turning the light around to observe our own inner processes and experiences. We have talked a great deal already about the way that this requires (and generates) a form of meta-cognitive (or meta-aware) standpoint from which we can observe ourselves. In fact, this idea that the self was able to somehow fragment and observe itself was rather controversial at the turn of the 20th century.

*pure experience and
direct experience*

Applying this method of introspection to our experiences of consciousness, James also made some interesting arguments about the nature and composition of experience itself. Perhaps most famously, he developed the concept of ‘direct experience’ or ‘pure experience’ as a way of identifying the first instant in the flow of experience that comes prior to (before) our interpretation and judgement of it.

Jamesian pure experience, which lies at the foundation of his radical empiricism, has been very influential and also controversial, if not rather mysterious. We don’t have the time to explore all of its implications here, but you might notice that we have already discussed the idea of ‘pure experience’ in the context of modern Mindfulness and also Buddhist philosophy.

While they are certainly not identical, the precise relationship between Jamesian pure experience and Buddhist pure experience is

a fascinating and productive area of research. At the very least, we might take note that both enable a conceptual and experiential differentiation between, on the one hand, experiences as they happen to us (suggesting that these are experiences as they really are) and then, on the other hand, our signification and embellishment of those (pure) experiences through the (almost immediate) layering of emotional responses and intellectual judgements on top of them.

In other words, in the absence of careful introspection, we risk being mistaken about the nature and content of our experiences (and thus of our real place in the world). We easily (and routinely) confuse our responses to experiences for the experiences themselves. As we've seen, in today's world, this insight is fundamental to all kinds of therapeutic interventions, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and MBCT.

James' most famous foreshadowing of these ideas was his (controversial) contention that the common sense position about the sequence of our experiences and emotions is wrong. He argues that 'Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike.' (Principles of Psychology, 1890, p.1065).

In fact, he contends that the order should not be: experience, emotion, action, but instead should be understood as: experience and action, followed by emotion. 'The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect ... that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble ...' (pp. 1065-6)

What this means, amongst other things, is that our emotions do not drive our actions but instead are responses to them. Our emotions are not present in our direct experience of the world – we add them later in response to the physical sensations that accompany our body's response to (or unity with) that experience. This also suggests that our body's actions and our experiences are much more immediately related than we might think, because they are not mediated by our emotions. We might think of the body and our experiences as unified.

So, when we look inside ourselves for the cause of our anger or fear, we find that it is not caused by the person who insulted or by

the bear that surprised us, but by the physical tension and explosive energy gathered into our body in those moments of experience.

Again, you might recognise some similarities between this account of our emotional condition and the accounts prevalent in the Mindfulness literature, where we routinely see that looking inside ourselves for our pure experience of the present moment is also a way of detaching ourselves from the force of our emotional responses.

Before we leave James and bring this module on 'Philosophy and Mindfulness' to a close, it's worth highlighting one last idea that we associate with his work, and that's the idea of the 'stream of consciousness,' which he describes in a chapter of his 1890 book, *Principles of Psychology*. His primary concern in this famous chapter is to deal to the question of 'attention' and the process of how we bring our attention to particular objects of (internal) experience.

consciousness does not appear to itself chopped into bit, it flows. we should speak of a stream of consciousness.

He made very deliberate use of the idea of a stream or flow to confront the prevailing idea at the time that events of consciousness were experienced in ready-made, discrete units, like carriages on a train or links in a chain. As we know, James did not believe that consciousness was composed of neatly-packaged, objective events.

'Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.' (*Principles of Psychology*, 1890, p.239)

Amongst other things, his point here was that there is no effective or meaningful reality for our consciousness, except for those things to which we direct our attention. Hence, our stream of consciousness arises entirely from the flow of our attention, as we move it from idea to experience and so on, letting it pause here or fly off somewhere else, like the continuous and unbroken life of a bird.

One of the implications of this, which might appear familiar to us from our discussions about how Mindfulness equates to the act of ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally,’ is that we might be able to cultivate and discipline our ability to direct our attention to particular mental events (rather than others) and thus transform the experiential quality of our consciousness (and thus our engagement with the world around us).

Indeed, while James is often credited as having invented the term ‘stream of consciousness’ in the English-speaking world, it is interesting to reflect that a very similar term (*viññāna-sota*) has been used continuously in the Pali traditions of Buddhism since the time of their original scriptures. In fact, in Buddhism, this idea represents the natural transience of all (mental) events and the fluidity of forms in the world, and the cultivation of Mindfulness is precisely seen as the best (and perhaps only) way for us to bring awareness (and discipline) to this continuous stream of our consciousness.

In the end, then, there are a number of tantalizing and fascinating points of contact between the philosophy of James and contemporary (as well as historical) accounts of Mindfulness. The point here is not to assert that they are talking about the same thing, but rather to take some time to consider whether and how James might help us to understand and enrich our theories and practices of Mindfulness today.

In our final session of this module, we’ll take a quick look back through all the sessions so far and see whether there are themes or problems that emerge as commonalities from all of these various traditions.



3.7. Summary

So, I had originally thought that Module 2 would be tough for you, but I guess that was before we tried to get through Module 3. I know that I congratulated you at the end of the last Module for having made it that far ... but, well, if you're still here now, you're doing extremely well indeed.

One of our big challenges in this module (one of many, I suspect) has been to try to wrap our heads around how an apparently simple practice (that we managed to operationalize into a couple of lines of description in Module 2) can mushroom into complex philosophical contestation and debate about the nature of reality, the meaning of experience, the integrity of human emotion and will, the dimensions of morality and ethical conduct, the essence of consciousness and selfhood, and so on. Isn't this just about sitting quietly with our eyes closed and breathing?!

And not only have we dashed through dozens of the most intractable problems of philosophy, but we have also taken some massive leaps through time and space, to consider positions on all of these questions in ancient India, China, Japan, and Greece, and then in modern America.

As though that were not enough, this magical mystery ride around world philosophy has also forced us to confront a whole series of questions in the theory and method of history itself. We have tried

to juggle at least two approaches at once: the first being the historian's ambition to provide a coherent and believable story about the development of ideas and practices that would have been recognisable to the characters in that story; and the second being the pragmatist's (or perhaps the therapist's) ambition to treat all those different stories as a giant melting pot of resources to be mobilized in the quest to solve specific problems in the present day.

In more concrete terms, should the story of Mindfulness today be the story of the emergence and development of sati in India and then an account of how it got screwed up as it travelled around the world and interacted with other ideas and practices from other traditions and places? Or, should the story of Mindfulness today be that of a newly emergent transnational construct that continues to draw on spiritual, psychological, and philosophical traditions from around the world whenever they seem useful?

In the context of all these moving parts – some of which are rather tectonic in nature – you might be forgiven for feeling a little dizzy. It has certainly been messing with my mind. So it's important for you to know that our purpose in this module hasn't been to master all the philosophy ever conceived anywhere, as well as all the different ways in which we might interpret, reconstruct, or narrate those philosophies. If you've been trying to accomplish that, then there's a good chance that you might have gone insane this week ... Instead, our purpose has been to explore some of the ways in which some different people at different times have attempted to understand something that feels a bit like Mindfulness.

The ultimate goal here is not only about having some understanding of their various positions and ideas (although I hope that's useful too), but also (and perhaps more importantly) it's about making sure that you're exposed to the unequivocal fact of disagreement, debate, development, and exploration in the idea and practice of (something like) Mindfulness.

Just like you, perhaps, all of the thinkers we've encountered began with a personal experience that they felt compelled to explore and explain, probably just to themselves at first and then later to others around them. For many of them, it felt like an experience that the conventional wisdom of their society could not adequately explain – it felt deeply personal but also grandly universal all at once. It

felt like something that was about everyone, and that everyone could (and perhaps even should) be able to experience it for themselves.

Without exception, all of the thinkers we've considered emphasised the importance of practice as an essential element of philosophy, and experience as an essential element of knowledge. They emphasise the importance of (and cultivation of) our independence and autonomy as thinkers and explorers. So, one of the lessons we should learn from this in this course is about the connection between Mindfulness and the value of subjective knowledge. This means, amongst other things, that your Mindfulness adventure is your adventure (not mine, not William James', not even Buddha's) ... and you can construct its meaning (for yourself) as you explore the terrain more (and more fully).

In fact, this is a really good way to view the scholarly purpose of our meditation labs and your personal Mindfulness practice (which I really hope is going well for you) – you are investigating and experimenting and collecting your own subjective data, which is also a process of thinking and practicing philosophical reflection on Mindfulness and on yourself.

So, if you take nothing else away from this module (even if all the philosophical insights into attention, awareness, discipline, and consciousness fade from your mind as soon as you've finished the sessions) ... if you take nothing else away, take this: your Mindfulness journey is your own, and the more sincere the effort you put into it, the more revelatory will be your findings as you move along.

And as we push ahead in this course together, we move next to Module 4, in which we're going to consider some of the social and political questions provoked by Mindfulness. Perhaps most central to the next module is a very simple descriptive question, and then a very complicated normative one: when we talk about the emergence of a Mindful Society, what do we imagine such a society would look like; and, given what we can imagine, would you really want to live in that society?



These readings have been prepared to support students of the Coursera MOOC: *De-Mystifying Mindfulness*. They are based on the lectures written for the course; the intention is to develop them into chapters for a comprehensive open-access textbook to support learning in this field. The images were conceptualized by Chris Goto-Jones with art by Siku, copyright on the images is reserved, mentalpraxis.com (2016).

We invite feedback and suggestions for additional material for these readings.

We also invite donations to assist in our mission to make this material available to anyone, anywhere who might benefit from it: *building knowledge for a more a more mindful world*.

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