



Tracing The Indian Roots Of Modern Mindfulness

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Abstract: Quantitative studies of Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) have proliferated in the last two decades. There is overwhelming scientific evidence to demonstrate MBIs such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy are as effective as medication management for those who experience recurrent depression. This proliferation has led to a downside as well, wherein psychologists have criticised its use for promoting capitalist, ableist systems. In this context, this paper traces the Indian roots of modern mindfulness and highlights its core values to ensure that mindfulness does not a tool of oppression but rather embraces the sub-altern, socio-political, and indigenous versions of its roots on its path to modernization.

IndexTerms: - Mindfulness, Psychology, Buddhism, India.

In the last two decades Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) have become popular in the field of psychology and psychotherapy (Purser, 2019). Quantitative studies around first-generation programs have proliferated in numbers, resulting in the understanding that Mindfulness is an effective modality for emotional regulation, stress management, and psychological flexibility. There is overwhelming scientific evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, a first generation MBI, to be effective as medication management for those who experience recurrent depression (Tickell et al., 2020). However, the shadow side of the practice has been the development of what is known as McMindfulness (Purser, 2019). This is a reactionary term used by traditional and contemporary Buddhist practitioners and psychologists who noticed that oppressive systems have taken to the use of mindfulness to fix issues of low productivity and absenteeism; and promote increased focus, productivity, and hustle culture among individuals, instead of questioning the systems in place and their ableist, patriarchal, violent structures that impose conditions of anxiety, stress, and other disabilities upon people. In this context, the current paper traces the Indian roots of modern Mindfulness and highlights its core values to ensure that mindfulness does not a tool of oppression but rather embraces the sub-altern, socio-political, and indigenous versions of its roots on its path to modernization.

Mindfulness has its origins in Buddhism (Bodhi, 2016). Buddha borrowed the Sanskrit word Smṛti (memory) and transformed its meaning, expressed through the Pali word Sati, which has come to mean “attentive awareness to present events” (Shaw, 2020, p. 8). In citing Gunaratana, Shaw (2020) noted that the term mindfulness can be described in any number of ways and that each definition would be right. In further tracing the meaning of the word mindfulness, Shaw (2020) stated that it has come to mean remembering, bearing in mind, and not forgetting but gently keeping alive something and being aware of what is going on. Shaw added that there is a particular presence of an ethical stance of care towards oneself and other embedded in the Pali word ‘Sati’ which is not fully captured in modern psychologized versions of mindfulness.

Further, mindfulness is part of the eightfold path that facilitates liberation from present and all future rebirths (Bodhi, 2016). The most important precept of Buddhism—the ‘Three Jewels’. According to this precept, on the journey to freedom from suffering, faith in the Buddha as the fully enlightened teacher, all his teachings (Dhamma) as the path, and a community (Sangha) that practices together, are crucial considerations. According to the Dhammas, the “right view” (Sammaditthi) is an essential determinant of mindfulness (as well as all the other seven ‘folds’ of the eightfold path) (Bodhi, 2016). Right view entails practices that take into consideration the interaction between intentional action and their consequences, and cultivation of wisdom to understand the nature of things. According to Rhys David (1910) mindfulness became the memory, recollection, calling-to-mind, being-aware-of, certain specified facts. Of these the most important was the impermanence (the coming to be as the result of a cause, and the passing away again) of all phenomena, bodily and mental. And it included the repeated application of this awareness, to each experience of life, from the ethical point of view.” (p.322) A tripartite model is used to trace Buddhism’s evolution (Gleig, 2019). The first period—Canonical Buddhism—is Buddhism as featured in the Pali Canons. The second period—Traditional Buddhism—grew post Buddha’s death (Mahaparinibbana). Thirdly, Modern Buddhism, came to be in the 20th century.

Canonical Buddhism is in Pali language and is preserved in what became the Theravada Buddhist tradition (birthed in India and eventually spread to the South of Asia including Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos). According to Gleig (2019), the three “baskets” (Pitakas) of knowledge present in Canonical Buddhism entail rules for the monastics (Vinaya), Buddha’s discourses (Suttas), and higher philosophical teachings of the path to liberation (Abhidhamma). The three “baskets” of knowledge were primarily oral traditions passed on within the sangha of monks and nuns (Shaw, 2020). The oral traditions were cultivated by the practice of complex systems of memorization to ensure that the tradition would be passed on generationally. This process of memorization and recitation in and of itself was a meditative practice of sati or mindfulness of the canonical period (Shaw, 2020).

Traditional Buddhism is a period marked by the spread of Buddhism and the writing down of the canons (Gleig, 2019). It is said that the Buddha encouraged his disciples, both monks and lay practitioners, to develop novel ways to teach the suttas which became an important part of the canons (Shaw, 2020). One such early text, that was largely poetic, short, and without narrative contexts, is called The Group of Discourses (Sutta-nipata) and was a rendition of mindfulness in Pali which was rich in nuance as compared to its Sanskrit counterpart word Smṛti. In this text, mindfulness came to mean “a quality needed for the awake and free mind, a way of relating to the world that seems to have a sense of presence, apparently more than, and even instead of, memory” (Shaw, 2020, p. 36).

Shaw (2020) writes that early texts often present mindfulness alongside other qualities such as wakefulness and diligence to the code of ethics of the Vinaya Pitaka. The Sutta on Loving Kindness describes mindfulness as a nonattached friendliness extended to oneself and the world and the Dhammapada often links mindfulness with other qualities that are necessary for its presence such as faith, concentration, vigor, awareness, clear comprehension, and so forth are mentioned (Shaw, 2020). In longer detailed suttas, such as the Abhidhamma, mindfulness of internal and external events is described. Mindfulness is also expressed as being akin to “salt in food: it just gives everything more of a taste” (Shaw, 2020, p. 44). Mindfulness is described as a gatekeeper ensuring wholesome ways of being. Further, practice of meditation was always accompanied by the cultivation of ethical behaviour. Once practices that make a person ready for meditation are cultivated; concentration, calming, or samadhi practices are introduced which are often present in all versions of Buddhism. Together, it is called the Great Sutta on Mindfulness (Mahasatipatthana-Sutta) which trains the individual in cultivating mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and events. According to Shaw, practices that cultivate loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are needed alongside meditative practices of calm and concentration. Within the Mahayana traditions, which arose after the Mahaparinibbana (death of the Buddha), the seeds of mindfulness are recognized as already present within all beings. That we all have the inherent capacity, experience, and access to mindfulness, and with conscious cultivation of knowledge can access the path to “right” mindfulness and hence, liberation.

Shaw (2020) stated that during the early CE when Buddhism began to spread into the north of Asia, Mahayana, a form of Buddhism, began to be practiced in Tibet and Mongolia. Buddhism practiced in these regions has influences of tantric practices and Mahayana influences and native traditions. Sanskrit texts pertaining to Abhidharma were practiced alongside rituals. Visualization practices were also employed. Several schools of Tibetan Buddhism emerged called Nyingama, Sakya, Kagyu and Geluk. In all these schools, the basic instruction of mindfulness, care, and awareness remained the same.

Buddhism practiced in east Asia like China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam was also called Mahayana (Shaw, 2020). In these regions, the schools within Mahayana that emerged were the Pure Land, the Tiantai, the Huayan, and the Chan schools.

It is important to note that these practices took root in India, and texts that were passed on to different regions informed the schools of their specific orientations. Within the Pure Land school in China and Japan, the practice of repetition or recollection of the Buddha was at the heart of what mindfulness entailed (Shaw, 2020). Huayan in China (Hwaeom in Korea, Kegon in Japan) is the Flower Garland school of Mahayana Buddhism which flourished in the 6th to 9th century CE based on texts that came from India that focused on emptiness teaching defining mindfulness as ethical action that impacts the whole universe (Shaw, 2020).

Tiantai school was inspired from practices in India and Southern Asia and was developed in China. In this school, Mindfulness was seen as fundamental to life and as a practice of seeing the seed of Buddhahood in all beings (Shaw, 2020). Chan Buddhism (Seon in Korea and Zen in Japan) introduced anecdotes that offered a “surprise element” (Shaw, 2020, p. 121) teaching and training people in staying open and practice constant awareness. Overall, a variety of practices such as Koans, chanting, the QI, and body practices, as well as breath awareness practice, were employed in cultivating Mindfulness (Shaw, 2020).

While literature, practices, rituals, and doctrines were different in each form and country where Buddhism was practiced, mindfulness as a meditation practice informed by Satipattana-sutta continued(/s) to be universal. The Sattipattana meditation emphasizes the four main areas of contemplation concerned with the body, feelings, mental states, and Dhammas (Anālayo, 2015). Along with the Anapanasati-sutta, they make the crux of secular mindfulness practices (Monteiro, 2015) that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Birthplace of Mindfulness

Buddhism took its roots when India was at the cusp of great changes during the middle of the first millennium BCE (Omvedt, 2003). The setting for the birth of Buddhism was the end of the long and illustrious Indic socio-cultural development and the beginnings of non-Rigvedic Indo-European migrations and the Vedic civilization, whose people all gradually moved into what is now North India's Gangetic Plains.

The major political arrangements were that of the hierarchical and tribal gana-sanghas (one of which was the Shakya gana-sangha of Siddharta Gotama), and the monarchical kingdoms. “Intense turmoil and often great immorality” (Omvedt, 2003, p. 29) is the description of the socio-economic times. The predominant cultural-religious context of the first millennium BCE that established the context for Buddha's teachings were the Samana and Brahman traditions.

Samana tradition is one of choosing the ascetic life. It depicts the renunciation of material life to strict austerities. The hope in the Samana tradition was to end the cycle of birth and life; and thus emerged the concept of Karma (Omvedt, 2003). According to Omvedt, this concept was organically developed as a way of dispensing the notion of a creator God as liable to the endless cycle of birth and death and instead focused on causality of one's own actions. However, the Vedic tradition soon embedded within the concept of Karma ideas of caste, and internalized ideas of good and evil in people of different castes (Omvedt, 2003). Further, the Vedic tradition is said to have taken to practice of strict ascetic life to receive boons from the Gods (Omvedt, 2003).

Several cults within the Samana tradition arose, centering ideas of materialism (e.g., Tantra and Lokayata), fatalism (Ajivikas), and dualism (Sankhya and Jainism) (Omvedt, 2003). According to Omvedt (2003), “Buddhism, Jainism, Lokayata and Sankhya were all evidently strong philosophical-religious traditions at the time of the writing of most of the Upanishads as well as the Brahmanical social literature (Manusmṛiti, Arthashastra) and the epics” (p. 39). In casting light on the milieu that led to the development of Buddhism Shepherd (2019) indicated that the Brahman traditions began to self-create. A gradual section of people “claiming birth-right and pure descent” (Omvedt, 2003, p. 43) came into being. Omvedt indicated that aside from Jainism and Buddhism, which continued their stronghold, other cults of the Samana tradition became subsumed in Brahmanism. The four-varna system, the karma and rebirth cycle to justify the varna system, social order of responsibility taking by other castes and

women was initiated. Gradually, the Brahman tradition interpreted the Vedas and made special efforts to hold on to this control they had fabricated.

What is seen then at the cusp of the middle millennium BCE is the segregation of people, the gradual documentation of Vedas per Brahmanical frames, socio-political turmoil, and philosophical and spiritual distress. Thus, according to Omvedt (2003), Buddhism arose not only in response to Brahmanism; “rather as an all-embracing solution to the human predicament in a world in transformation” (p. 30).

There were strong kingdoms of this period that has significant connections with Buddhism. According to Omvedt (2003), several early kinds of Kosala and Magadha were “Buddhism sympathizers” (p.119). The Mauryan empire under the reign of King Asoka from 272 to 232 BCE, was one of the largest and most prosperous kingdoms in India. King Asoka was Buddhist. The state and society under the Buddhist model were far different than the Brahmanical version that was also fast developing. The latter, according to Omvedt, offered far more independence to merchant and artisan guilds and were encouraged to thrive with very little intervention of the Buddhist state. India was seen as participating in global trade because of the formation of an all-India trade. Scientific development along with the “approach of self-reliance, a spirit of skepticism and orientation to notions of regular relationships encouraged development in all fields of science” (p.140). Buddhism is said to have played a “crucial role in establishing a scientific medicine” (p. 141). Shepherd (2019) argued that Buddhism offered an ethical framework upon which to promote development and growth. One where morality and compassion were important features of everyday life.

In India, by second millennium CE, Buddhism, as an overtly practiced religion, was nearly wiped out. Shepherd (2019) cited the gradual stronghold by Brahminic Hinduism with its established social practice (varnashrama dharma) and its co-option and reinterpretation of native cults and culture under the name of being a “tolerant” religion ironically led to the gradual marginalization of Buddhism as a separate entity in India. The echoes of Buddhism, however, did not fade (Omvedt, 2003).

The Bhakti movement (which eventually became co-opted into Hinduism) for “nearly thousand years” after the death of Buddha (Omvedt, 2003, p. 186), as well as the Mahima Dharma movement of the early 19th century, continued to offer an alternative to the ostracization of the shudras and ati-shudras. These cults and movements continued to include Buddhist practices of begging for cooked food and rejection of all caste distinctions and ritualistic practices. According to Omvedt (2003), the practices of the Mahima Dharma movement mirrored Mahayana Buddhist practices. Further, during the 19th century, Jyotiba Phule, considered the founder of anti-caste, farmers, and women’s movement in Maharashtra, set up the Universal Religion of Truth called the Satyashodhak Samaj and wrote the Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak, a “savage critique of the Vedas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, and undertook the effort to formulate a religious alternative” (Omvedt, 2003, p. 232). Omvedt stated that while Phule knew little about Buddhism his premise followed along the similar lines of anti-ritualistic, ethical practices for everyday life for all. It can be discerned that while Mindfulness practices were not predominantly practiced in India by the end of first millennium, Buddhist (and mindfulness) principles of ethics and “right” actions continued to influence Bhakti and other anti-caste movements as they continue to be practice to the present day in India. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Indian roots of Mindfulness is embedded in a social justice stance that ensures the presence of care towards oneself and others embedded in the practices of both formal meditations, and everyday life practices.

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