

An Examination of Temporality in Mindfulness Meditation

Yao-ming Tsai

(National Taiwan University / Professor)

국문 초록

마음챙김 명상은 마음을 완전히 안정시키고 개인의 몸과 느낌과 마음 및 관련된 요소들의 실제 활동에 대한 자각을 유지시키는 하나의 방법이다. 오늘날 점점 더 많은 사람들이 마음챙김 수련의 핵심적인 특징으로서 현 순간에 대한 자각을 강조하고 있으며, 결과적으로 마음챙김을 현재의 순간에 머무르는 기술로 간주하고 있다. 그러나 시간의 관점에서 보면 현재라는 것은 끊임없이 변동한다. 마음챙김이 현재의 순간에 대한 자각이라면 그것은 과연 어느 정도까지이며, 그러한 자각 속에서 과거와 미래는 어떠한 역할을 하는가? 이 논문에서는 『염처경(Satipatthāna-sutta)』과 명상수행에 관한 다른 불교문헌들을 검토함으로써 그러한 문제를 다루고자 한다. 만일 마음챙김이 명상에의 몰입(Pāli, jhāna)과 집중(Pāli, samādhi) 그리고 열반을 포함하여 그 최대치로까지 개발되어야 하는 것이라면, 단지 현재의 순간에만 집중하거나 우리의 경험을 판단하지 않고 관찰하는 것만으로는 이론적으로나 실천의 측면에서나 『염처경』에서 설해진 많은 목표들을 성취하기에 충분하지 않을 것이다. 이 논문은 현재라는 것이 머무르지 않는데도 어떻게 마음챙김과 명상에의 몰입이 가능한가 하는 어려운 문제에 대답하기 위해서 이론적으로 시간과 시간성에 관한 철학적 사유가 요청되며, 또한 존재의 총체적인 고통을 극복하는 데에 있어 과거와 미래 그리고 현재를 다루는 보다 포괄적인 전략 또한 실천적으로 필수적이라는 점을 인식할 것을 제안한다.

키워드: 시간성, 마음챙김, 불교 명상, 열반, 『염처경(Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta)』

I. Is Mindfulness Meditation Only About Focusing on the Present Moment?

Mindfulness meditation in a Buddhist context is a way to steady the mind from the ground up and maintain awareness of the actual activities of one's body (Pāli, *kāya*), feelings (Pāli, *vedanā*), mind (Pāli, *citta*), and related factors (Pāli, *dhamma*).

The Pāli term *satipaṭṭhāna* (Skt, *smṛty-upasthāna*) can be analyzed as “attending (*upaṭṭhāna*) to mindfulness (*sati*),” “presence (*upaṭṭhāna*) of mindfulness (*sati*),” or as “foundation (*paṭṭhāna*) of mindfulness (*sati*).”¹⁾ It is worth noting that *sati* (Skt, *smṛti*) means mindfulness or awareness. This term originally meant “recollection,” “remembrance,” or “bearing in mind.”²⁾ In Buddhism, the ability to be mindful of the flow of direct experience in the present is an important skill, but mindfulness of relevant aspects of the past is also needed. Mindfulness, therefore, is not about only abiding in the present, but has a significant past and future component as well. If one were only ever mindful of the present, one could be trapped in it, and this is not any way to develop Buddhist meditation and wisdom, or even to navigate the everyday world.

However, it is common nowadays to hold that mindfulness exercises emphasize or are exclusively focused on the present moment. Contemporary mindfulness exercises, or secular mindfulness phenomena, are tantamount to living in the present. Not surprisingly, the predominant focus on the

1) Concerning the term *satipaṭṭhāna*, see Anālayo 2012, 29-30; Anālayo 2019, 571-572; Bodhi 2000, 1504.

2) Concerning the interpretation of the term *sati/smṛti*, see Sharf 2014, 942-943.

present moment even appears in the title of many books about mindfulness exercises.³⁾

Questioning whether mindfulness meditation is only about focusing on the present moment is crucial to proceeding in developing correct and complete meditative practices. In terms of temporality, three periods can be distinguished along the dimension of time: the past, future and present. Obviously, it is insufficient to deal with long-term accumulated problems and to understand the life, world and time if the focus is only laid on the present moment. How is one to encounter this seeming discrepancy between the three periods of time and the present moment?

II. Mindfulness Meditation Interpreted from the Perspective of a Three-stratum Model of the Mind

Since mindfulness meditation is not confined to any one tradition in Buddhism, to address the issue of temporality in mindfulness meditation, this paper draws on both *śrāvaka-yāna* (vehicle of listeners [i. e. disciples]) and *mahā-yāna* (great vehicle) texts of the Buddhist traditions. In addition to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (The Discourse on the Ways of Attending to Mindfulness) of the *śrāvaka-yāna*, *mahā-yāna* contains a lot of texts incorporating the teaching of mindfulness into Bodhisattva practice. For example: “Moreover, Subhūti, this is the great vehicle of the Bodhisattva, the great being, that is the four ways of attending to mindfulness. Which four? Attending to mindfulness by way of body, by way of feelings, by way of mind, and by way of related factors.” [translation my own]⁴⁾

3) See e. g., Black 2015; Kabat-Zinn 2012; Thich Nhat Hanh 2012.

4) “*punar aparāṃ subhūte bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya mahāyānaṃ, yad uta catvāri smṛty-upasthānāni. katamāni catvāri? kāya-smṛty-upasthānaṃ vedanā-smṛty-upasthānaṃ citta-smṛty-upasthānaṃ dharma-smṛty-upasthānaṃ.*” Dutt 1934, 203-207; Kimura 2009, 75-80. Cf. T. 7,

It is one thing to say mindfulness works for some people, but quite another to know how it works. The following three-stratum, vertical model of the mind may be useful as a starting point for understanding how mindfulness works.

The outer-stratum mental activities are associated with daily tasks, including: the six consciousnesses, immediate mental occurrences tied to proper functioning of the mind-body complex, mental reaction to people, non-human sentient beings, environment, as well as routine learning and training activities, responsibilities and duties attached to one's position, and relaxing and entertaining activities. This stratum is characteristic of immediate occurrences and routine reactions. If such a daily network is too much to handle, stress or pressure might follow as a consequence of an excessively complicated and heavy burden.

The inner-stratum mental activities consist of two parts. The first part includes latent personality traits and underlying capabilities. The second part consists in mental storehouse accumulated over a long period of time from continuous mental leftovers and emotional residues day after day. This stratum is characteristic of long-term accumulation and subliminal. The second part of this stratum, in particular, is almost not recognized or understood by the conscious mind, but still has a strong influence on it on some occasions.⁵⁾

The bottom-stratum mental activities are located in the lowest layer of the mind. Just as clean water flows into a swimming pool through a number of bottom inlets, so the mental occurrences in the bottom stratum are relatively clean and even luminous.⁶⁾ Although mental occurrences tend to move up to the top where the perceptual objects can be grasped or be responded to, the

no. 220 (2), 77c-79b; Conze 1975, 153-155.

5) For a detailed explanation of the first two strata of mental activities, see T. 16, no. 676, 692; Lamotte 1935, 54-59; Powers 1994, 67-77.

6) See e.g., "*tathā hi tac cittam a-cittam, prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā.*" [Accordingly, that thought is not-thought, since the essential original nature of thought is transparently luminous.] [translation my own] Vaidya 1960, 3; Wogihara 1932, 37-40. Cf. T. 7, no. 220 (4), 763c; Conze 1975, 84.

key factors to mindfulness are staying mindful of the bottom-stratum mental occurrences and remaining as undisturbed and undefiled as possible by both perceptual objects and mental currents in the upper strata.

III. A Simple Strategy of Contemporary Mindfulness Exercises in Coping with Complicated Mental Problems

This section provides some background information on the problems encountered by contemporary mindfulness exercises. Nowadays most problems, social or individual, have become as complicated as they can be. Many tools, old or new, are deployed to cope with various problems. Mindfulness exercises, especially the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program, can be regarded as among the many tools in responding to such problems as stress, anxiety, worry, fear, and depression.

At least three main guidelines for the recourse to mindfulness exercises can be extracted.

First, making complicated problems as simple as possible: Complicated problems may not have simple solutions. However, when people are already overwhelmed by complicated entanglement, it could worsen the situation if asked to understand the complexity of being, while continuing to have a complicated lifestyle. In this connection, a temporary yet viable solution is to turn things into simple mode in order to be able to follow practical guidelines and to alleviate the problems. By way of this strategy, people may at least gain some control over their minds.

Second, reviewing exterior problems downward to the basic level: Generally speaking, it is much less effective to chase after derivative phenomena than to adjust at the most basic level. Buddhism explicates various mental derivative dispositions or mental concomitants (Pāli, *cetasika*), some of which are beneficial, some harmful and contributing to our complex

world. However, underneath mental concomitants there is the most basic level of awareness, which is the foundation for cultivating mindfulness. Since awareness is fundamental to mental concomitants, simply staying mentally aware can be effective in staying out of complicated entanglement. For most people, getting into mental complexity is habitual but it takes lots of practice to stay mentally aware.

Third, being as attentive as possible to the harmful effects of over-discursiveness: Mentally digressive problems mainly originate from distracting thoughts, which prevent us from focusing on our immediate situations and significantly weaken our ability and skill to be effective in tackling emotional issues. Although people are somewhat inclined to become distracted, it is worth learning skills that can enhance attention because such practices can create continuous improvement in comprehending and maneuvering daily life from the ground up.

The above three guidelines, i.e., keeping the mindset as simple, basic and attentive as possible, can be regarded as the main ingredients of mindfulness. In other words, mindfulness works at the basic level of the mindset and stays attentive with the simplicity of mental occurrences.

IV. A Reflection on Contemporary Mainstream Mindfulness Exercises

A twofold reflection can be brought about concerning contemporary mainstream mindfulness exercises: first, on the effectiveness in solving complicated mental problems; second, on the approach to meditative practices.

First, just like an emergency room cannot substitute for an entire hospital, mindfulness exercises cannot always stay within the horizon of immediate practical measures. Complicated problems involve too many interrelated factors to be reduced to simple guidelines. Taking stress-reduction

mindfulness exercises as an example, stress-related mental disturbances can be somewhat alleviated or might be simply hidden by following simple guidelines but conceiving the situation in a simplistic manner might not only be an impossibility but impracticable in helping comprehend the complexity of the problems. Most mental problems last over time and can have deep roots. Due to the lack of comprehension of the process spanning over time, it is easy to fall back to recurrent problems of mental disturbances.

Second, mindfulness exercises in contemporary western societies are set to tackle complicated mental problems. Like fast food, such an application highlights ready-to-use tips and techniques for instant results. Correspondingly, along the timeline, the present moment is exclusively emphasized. However, in the Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is the basis of meditative practices⁷⁾ and can be developed to calm abiding (Pāli, *samatha*), insight meditation (Pāli, *vipassanā*), meditative absorption (Pāli, *jhāna*), meditative attainment (Pāli, *samāpatti*), and meditative concentration (Pāli, *samādhi*).⁸⁾ Therefore, it is important to examine if mindfulness in the context of meditative practices is only about focusing on the present moment.

Following the above reflection and analysis, the idea of the present moment is not to be taken for granted, as a given, as if it were something out there, waiting to be lived.⁹⁾ First, moment is a very vague term, generally used in a casual manner. A moment means a very short time, which can refer to a few seconds, minutes, or even hours. Second, in linear thinking, time is divided into three distinct regions in a sequential manner, like a straight line: the past, the present, and the future. The present is regarded as the period of time that is happening now, differentiated from what has been lying behind us and what will be ahead of us. How people's minds construct

7) For example, mindfulness is the first factor of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Pāli, *satta bojjhaṅgā*), and the other ones, in sequence, are investigation of related factors (*dhamma-vicaya*), effort (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*) of both body and mind, meditative concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Cf. Gethin 2001, 146-189.

8) See e.g., Tsai 2018, 515-516.

9) See e.g., Wittmann and Schmidt 2014, 199-210; Purser 2015, 680-686.

and differentiate between the past, present and future largely depends on how they experience, perceive, grasp, and express the passage of time. In other words, the difference between temporal milestones is an illusion in the sense that such a difference is not the reality of the sentient world but, rather, people's differentiating projection onto temporal changes in the world. Third, the discrepancy between impermanent process and the temporal structure of conceptual construction makes it more difficult to take hold of the so-called present moment. Temporal phenomena, especially mental occurrences, are so fleeting that people may not even be aware of them, or that the moment people have just become consciously aware of has already become the past. With the passage of time, the moment that was once the present becomes part of the past, but as a conceptual construct, the present moment is always the present moment. In view of the discrepancy between fleeting time and conceptual identity, one should be more cautious while applying the so-called present moment in mindful practice.

V. The Reality of the Sentient World in the Context of the Buddha's Teachings on Temporality

How the Buddha saw the reality of the sentient world in terms of temporality will be expounded briefly so that the issue of temporality in contemporary mindfulness exercises can be better examined. The implicit idea behind such an examination is that mindfulness exercises cannot stay within an extremely closed horizon of space and time to correctly understand and to effectively solve the related problems. Four main points may be summarized as follows.

First, the sentient world, from both microscopic and macroscopic aspects, consists in the impermanent (Pāli, *anicca*) process of conditioned co-arising (Pāli, *paṭicca-samuppāda*). The activities of sentient beings are thus compounded (Pāli, *saṅkhata*) and are caught in a causal process. By

sequentially riding life's ups and downs, suffering (Pāli, *dukkha*) is almost all that remains for ordinary sentient beings. In the context of attending to mindfulness, the meditator gives special attention to the arising and ceasing phenomena associated with the body, feelings, mind, and related factors, that is, by seeing the present (and past and future) moment-to-moment fluctuation of all phenomena, he/she will realize the impermanence and instability of all phenomena, and understand the root of suffering.

Second, due to impermanence, conditioned co-arising, and suffering, whatever may be related to sentient beings, be it the body or the mind, is empty (Pāli, *suñña*)¹⁰ and is illusory or deceptive appearance (Pāli, Skt. *māyā*),¹¹ and is not the self (Pāli, *an-attan*), not-mine or not belonging to a self (Pāli, *an-attaniya*). In short, any conditioned factor depends for its existence on other factors. In the same way, the dimension of time, any point (or period) of time, be it in the past, future or present, is empty and is illusory, and is not the self, not-mine.

Third, due to emptiness and illusion, all factors (Pāli, *dhamma*) and phenomena are non-dualistic (Pāli, Skt. *a-dvaya*) in the sense that they do not exist separately from each other, nor do they in any way oppose each other.¹² The past, future and present are thus brought about as mere conventional designations, and different periods of time are therefore non-dualistic.

Fourth, it is important to observe the present activities as compounded phenomena that have arisen depending on conditions so that the present activities as emptiness and illusion can be correctly understood. As taught in the Four Noble Truths (Pāli, *cattāri ariya-saccāni*), inquiry into the second Noble Truth on the origination of suffering (Pāli, *dukkha-samudayaṃ ariya-*

10) For works on emptiness in śrāvaka-yāna Buddhism, see Choong 1999; Choong 2004.

11) Concerning perspectives on illusion from the teachings of the *Samyuktāgama*, see T. 2, no. 99, nos. 186, 187, 265, 273, 497, 574, 591, 993, 1100, 1107, 1118, 1214, 1215, 1221, 1227, 1308.

12) Concerning perspectives on non-dualism in śrāvaka-yāna Buddhism, see e.g., *Kaccāna-gotta-sutta* (Bodhi 2000, 544), or *Kātyāyana-sūtra* (Tripāthī 1962, 167-170). Cf. Tsai 2014, 1-31; Tsai 2020, 5-36.

saccam), particularly on craving (Pāli, *taṇhā*), is crucial for effective solutions to the problem of suffering.¹³⁾ Such an inquiry would involve examining the past and future to achieve liberating insight, which certainly goes beyond present moment awareness. In sum, as the final goal of mindfulness meditation, liberation is both timeless (Pāli, *akālika*)¹⁴⁾ and beyond time:

Dry up what pertains to the past, do not take up anything to come later. If you will not grasp in the middle, you will live at peace. (*Sutta-Nipāta* 1099)¹⁵⁾

Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present, and cross over to the farther shore of existence. With mind wholly liberated, you shall come no more to birth and decay. (*Dhammapada* 348)¹⁶⁾

VI. Problem Solving and Goal Setting in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (The Discourse on the Ways of Attending to Mindfulness) is the most fundamental and most significant text on mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist traditions. Practically speaking, it would be helpful to see this text from the angle of problem solving and goal setting. Problem solving is the process of finding and defining problems in an orderly manner to reach solutions to problems.¹⁷⁾ Goal setting is a motivational technique by setting and achieving specific goals.¹⁸⁾

13) Cf. Norman 2003, 210-223.

14) Cf. Bronkhorst 1985, 187-190.

15) “*Yaṃ pubbe taṃ visosehi, pacchā te māhu kiñcanaṃ. Majjhe ce no gahessasi, upasanto carissasi.*” Bodhi 2017, 340. Cf. “Make what [existed] previously wither away. May there be nothing for you afterwards. If you do not grasp anything in between, you will wander calmed.” Norman 2001, 123.

16) “*Muñca pure muñca pacchato majjhe muñca bhavassa pāragū, sabbattha vimuttamānaso na puna jātijaraṃ upehisi.*” Buddharakkhita 2007, 105.

17) Concerning problem solving, see Robertson 2017, 1-26.

18) Concerning goal setting, see Camilius 2011, 25-29.

The thesis statement of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*'s "Introduction" touches on the major problems to be solved and the major goals to be accomplished through mindfulness as follows:

Monks, this is a one-way path for the purification of sentient beings (*ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā*), for passing beyond sorrow and grief (*soka-paridevānaṃ samatikkamāya*), for the disappearance of suffering and discontent (*dukkha-domanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya*), for realizing the proper approach (*ñāyassa adhiḅgamāya*), for the direct experience of *nibbāna* (*nibbānassa sacchi-kiriyāya*)—namely (*yad-idam*) the four ways of attending to mindfulness (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*). [translation my own]¹⁹⁾

Concerning problem solving, the major problems include sorrow, grief, suffering, and discontent. Concerning goal setting, the major goals include a one-way path for the purification of sentient beings, the proper approach, and *nibbāna*. It is worth noting that in this context problem solving and goal setting for mindfulness meditation are not another half-baked scheme. Mindfulness meditation is so presented as to thoroughly solve the targeted problems and fully accomplish the targeted goals.

Besides the above-mentioned major problems, there are some other problems encountered in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, two of which are of certain interest for understanding the broader context of mindfulness meditation. First, overcoming one's covetousness for and discontent with the world (Pāli, *vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassam*) is commonly required for abiding in attending to mindfulness by way of body, feelings, mind, and related factors. The twofold problem composed of covetousness (Pāli, *abhijjhā*) and discontent (Pāli, *domanassa*) is to be tackled by a single approach, i.e., cultivating mindfulness.²⁰⁾ Second, a set of the five hindrances (Pāli, *nīvaraṇa*) -- sensual desire (Pāli, *kāma-cchanda*), ill-will (Pāli, *byāpāda*), sloth and torpor

19) Cf. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005, 145-155; Gethin 2008, 141-151.

20) Concerning covetousness and discontent, see Anālayo 2012, 67-72.

(Pāli, *thina-middha*), restlessness and remorse (Pāli, *uddhaccakukkucca*), doubt (Pāli, *vicikiccha*)-- are listed among related factors by way of which attending to mindfulness can be attained.²¹⁾

The above-mentioned “problems” may not seem so problematic at first glance. However, Buddhist scriptures do not teach just how to live a normal life with mental disturbances, but to ascend to a sublime state of mind step by step by pacifying mental fluctuations. In view of such concern, sensual desire, ill-will, and the like are regarded as problems, which are to be tackled by recourse to mindfulness meditation.

In the same vein, to reduce stress and to gain relaxation merely constitute the requirements in the preparatory stage, but are not regarded as goals in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. The prominent goal is *nibbāna*, the extinguishing of the flame of defilements and liberation from *samsāra*.

VII. Temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

It is worth mentioning that the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* does not say the exact words “focusing on the present moment.” In a sense, the exclusive focus on the present moment is an invention of contemporary mindfulness exercises.

As the targeted problems do not just happen randomly and arbitrarily but have accumulated over a long period of time, the antidote cannot be effective without looking at the bigger picture or examining long-term cumulative effects. As the prominent goal is set to realize *nibbāna*, the cultivation of mindfulness cannot be effective without understanding how the related practices can be eventually conducive to realizing such a final goal.²²⁾ In this regard, at least the following four points should be brought to

21) Besides the five hindrances, other sets of related factors include the five aggregates of attachment (Pāli, *upādāna-kkhandha*), the six internal and external spheres of sense (Pāli, *āyatana*), the seven constituents of enlightenment (Pāli, *bojjhaṅga*), and the four noble truths (Pāli, *ariya-sacca*).

22) It would also be helpful to mention that mindfulness is one of the five mental faculties (Pāli,

attention concerning temporality in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

First, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the practice of attending to mindfulness begins by way of body. In the body, contemplating the body (*kāye kāyānupassī*) begins with the section about in-breathing and out-breathing (*ānāpāna*), which in turn begins with the following instruction:

Just mindful, he breathes in. Just mindful, he breathes out. As he breathes in a long breath, he understands: “I am breathing in a long breath (*dīghaṃ assasāmi*).” As he breathes out a long breath, he understands: “I am breathing out a long breath (*dīghaṃ passasāmi*).” As he breathes in a short breath, he understands: “I am breathing in a short breath (*rassaṃ assasāmi*).” As he breathes out a short breath, he understands: “I am breathing out a short breath (*rassaṃ passasāmi*).” [translation my own]

Here the breathing provides an object for attending to mindfulness. During mindful breathing practice, the focus is placed on breath. However, this does not automatically mean that the awareness is confined exclusively to the present-moment breathing. It takes a certain amount of time to breathe. Some breathing, including inhaling and exhaling, is longer than the other. No matter if it is longer or shorter, the practitioner is supposed to not only stay mindful along the whole process of breathing, but also contemplate and understand the length of the breathing. It is difficult to imagine how this guideline can be practically applied if the practitioner focuses only on the present moment. In other words, attending to mindfulness is not so much about the present moment; It has more to do with a continuous flow process from moment to moment.

Second, the section about in-breathing and out-breathing ends with the following instruction:

indriya) and five mental strengths (*bala*), and that the other ones, which it works with, are trustful confidence (*saddhā*), effort (*virīya*), meditative concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*).

Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors arise (*samudaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati*). Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors vanish (*vaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati*). Or in the body, he dwells contemplating the way related factors arise and vanish (*samudaya-vaya-dhammānupassī vā kāyasmim viharati*). [translation my own]

Here the mindful breathing practice is designed to stay mindful in contemplating the arising and vanishing of breathing-related factors. This kind of practice can be considered as an embodiment of general Buddhist approaches such as attending to and understanding impermanence, conditioned co-arising, and the Four Noble Truths. It is obvious that simply focusing on the present moment will not be enough to fulfil the intended contemplation. Once again, attending to mindfulness requires continuous contemplation (Pāli, *anupassin*), and it is through continuous mindfulness (Pāli, *satimant*) and contemplation by way of breathing that correctly understanding (Pāli, *sampajāna*) (the reality of) breathing can be achieved.²³⁾ In this context, the mindful breathing practice assumes a larger role than merely an attempt to reduce or relieve pressure. Staying mindful in contemplating the fluctuations during breathing becomes crucial for obtaining a correct understanding of the reality of breathing. Contemplation and understanding therein, in turn, push the mindful breathing practice to higher levels.

Third, in addition to breathing, mindful practice is also applied to ways of postures (Pāli, *iriyāpatha*, including walking, standing, sitting, lying down), correct understanding (Pāli, *sampajāna*, including of going forward, going back, looking ahead, looking around, bending, stretching and so on, becoming one who acts with correct understanding), attention to repulsiveness (Pāli, *paṭikūlamanasikāra*, in regard to this very body, full of various kinds of impurity), attention to the (four material) elements (Pāli, *dhātu-manasikāra*, including the earth element,

23) For an analysis of the term *sampajāna*, see Maharaj 2013, 66.

the water element, the fire element, the wind element), and the nine (stages of decomposition in a) charnel ground (Pāli, *nava-sivathika*, in regard to a body as a corpse thrown into a charnel ground, there being nine stages of decomposition).

As the body consists of many interrelated systems of organs, functioning in various aspects of personality and social life, and lasting for some time even after death, mindful practice includes, but is not limited to, breathing. No matter which aspect is considered, the focus cannot be limited to the present moment alone, but would need to include the process through which each aspect of the body is formed, maintained, altered, and disintegrated over time. Again, such a holistic approach to the body is vital for seeing the far deeper meaning in the big problems that face sentient beings.

Fourth, the goals in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* go beyond the level of correct understanding, going as far as the realization of *nibbāna*, which is well attested both in the sutta's "Introduction" and in the section on abiding in attending to mindfulness by way of related factors. In that section, the set of the Four Noble Truths (Pāli, *ariya-sacca*) is listed among related factors, and the third Noble Truth is indicated as follows: "He understands as it really is: 'This is the cessation of suffering.'" (*ayaṃ dukkha-nirodho'ti yathā-bhūtaṃ pajānāti.*) Obviously, the practice of attending to mindfulness extends all the way from breathing to realizing *nibbāna* and to understanding it as the cessation of suffering. When it comes to temporality, however, *nibbāna*, or the cessation of suffering, may pose a profound challenge to conventional thinking. In the Buddhist scriptures, timeless *nibbāna* is invariably characterized as the unconditioned nature of reality, devoid of the temporal sequence of changes.²⁴⁾ From the perspective of timebound, conditioned existence, it is appropriate to regard breathing and even related factors as characterized by arising, change, and decay in what is present. However, mindfulness meditation can also lead to a timeless dimension of reality where the conditioned process of suffering completely ends and there

24) See Collins 2010, 8, 34.

is no further rebirth in the cycle of existence. Therefore, if mindful practice is regarded merely as techniques within a given temporal horizon, especially concealed within the present moment, then such a view will hinder mindfulness meditation from approaching *nibbāna*.

VIII. Conclusion

After a rigorous examination of temporality in mindfulness meditation, three key points can be drawn from this study as follows.

First, it seems empty to say that mindfulness meditation is about focusing on the present moment. After all, what is there in the present moment on which to focus? Unless the practice of attending to mindfulness is intentionally and specifically carried out by way of body, feelings, mind, or related factors, the present moment per se is like an empty box. That is, in Buddhist practice, mindfulness meditation is to be focused on particular features of the present, and not just of them in the present moment. The moment-to-moment experiences of everyday life, due to being random and sporadic in nature, can hardly be used for attending to mindfulness in a systematic manner or in a significant way. In order for currently occurring experiences to be more suitable for mindful practice, it is particularly important to consider and choose from a wide range of aspects that are both pertinent and conducive to cultivating mindfulness. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, body, feelings, mind, and related factors can contribute equally to the cultivation of mindfulness, and the act of breathing is only a part of the body that serves as a gateway to mindfulness meditation. Therefore, an exclusive emphasis on the present moment seems hollow and stale, and an exclusive emphasis on breathing exercises seems partial and inadequate. In a meditative context, the effort can be made to focus on the flow of the immediate present, while also bearing in mind relevant and useful aspects of the past and future.

Second, mindful practice, when purposeful and embedded in a meaningful context, can successfully deal with difficult issues and achieve specific goals. Owing to the lack of a temporal context, the idea of being fully in the present often propounded by contemporary mainstream mindfulness exercises will be inadequate to meet the task. Maybe some people feel content with living in the present. But mindful practice can do more than just that. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, sorrow, grief, suffering, covetousness, discontent, various mental hindrances and so on can be subdued by proper training in mindfulness meditation. Besides, mindfulness meditation is not just about raising and maintaining awareness, but about seeking more advanced goals on the path of meditation. Therefore, continuous contemplation and correct understanding are integrated into mindful practice to examine and solve problems and to enhance the ability to achieve goals. The effectiveness of implementing strategies in the problem-solving and goal-setting process requires thorough examination of cumulative impact problems and persistent commitment to long-term goals. This goes beyond the present moment.

Third, that mindful practice can be oriented toward a timeless dimension of reality is probably the most significant message of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. Timeless dimension, in the context of this study, refers to *nibbāna* or the cessation of suffering. *Nibbāna* is neither created, nor conditioned existence, nor subject to change, and is permanent. “Timeless” is not used to mean “everlasting temporal duration.” Rather, it is in the sense of neither being restricted to any temporal boundaries nor being affected by the passage of time that *nibbāna* is timeless. On the one hand, mindful practice can be regarded as a temporal point process; on the other hand, mindful practice is a one-way path for the direct experience of *nibbāna*. Therefore, an integral approach combining both temporal perspective and non-temporal perspective is required for mindful practice to work with the greater likelihood of cultivation and realization.

Abbreviation

T. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai.

Primary Sources

Samyuktāgama. T. 2, no. 99. Guṇabhadra (tr.).

The Large Sūtra Perfection of Wisdom / Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra. T. 7, no. 220 (2).
Xuanzang (tr.).

The Large Sūtra Perfection of Wisdom / Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra. T. 7, no. 220 (4).
Xuanzang (tr.).

Samdhi-nirmocana-sūtra. T. 16, no. 676. Xuanzang (tr.).

Secondary Sources

Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2012. *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*. Cambridge: Windhorse.

_____. 2019. "The Emphasis on the Present Moment in the Cultivation of Mindfulness." *Mindfulness* 10 (3): 571-581.

Black, Anna. 2015. *The Little Pocket Book of Mindfulness: Don't dwell on the past or worry about the future, Simply BE in the present with mindfulness meditations*. London: Ryland Peters & Small.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (tr.) 2000. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom.

_____. 2017. *Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries*. Somerville: Wisdom.

- Bronkhorst, Johannes. 1985. "Akālika in the Buddhist Canon." *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 10: 187-190.
- Buddharakkhita, Thera. (tr.) 2007. *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Camilius, Egeni. 2011. "Chapter 4: The Goal Theory on Motivation." In *The Epistemology of Motivation: Harnessing the Art*. Bloomington: Xlibris, 25-29.
- Choong, Mun-keat. 1999. *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- _____. 2004. *Annotated Translation of Sūtras from the Chinese Saṃyuktāgama relevant to the Early Buddhist Teachings on Emptiness and the Middle Way*. Johor: Lu Ye Chan Si.
- Collins, Steven. 2010. *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Conze, Edward. (tr.) 1975. *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 1975. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*. Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation.
- Dutt, Nalinaksha. (ed.) 1934. *The Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. London: Luzac & Co.
- Gethin, R. M. L. 2001. "Chapter 5: The Factors of Awakening." In *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*. Oxford: Oneworld, 146-189.
- Gethin, Rupert. (tr.) 2008. "Establishing Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*)." In *Sayings of the Buddha: A Selection of Suttas from the Pali Nikāyas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 141-151.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 2012. *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment – and Your Life*. Boulder: Sounds True.
- Kimura, Takayasu. 2009. (ed.) *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā: I-2*. Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin.
- Lamotte, Étienne. 1935. *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra: l'Explication des Mystères*. Louvain: Université de Louvain.
- Maharaj, Ayon. 2013. "Yogic Mindfulness: Hariharānanda Āraṇya's Quasi-Buddhistic

- Interpretation of *Smṛti* in *Patañjali's Yogasūtra* I,20.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 41 (1): 57-78.
- Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu., & Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (tr.) 2005. “10: *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* – The Foundations of Mindfulness.” In *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Somerville: Wisdom, 145-155.
- Norman, K. R. (tr.) 2001. *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*. 2nd ed. Oxford: The Pali Text Society.
- _____. 2003. “The Four Noble Truths.” In *Collected Papers*, Vol. II. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 210-223.
- Powers, John. (tr.) 1994. *Wisdom of Buddha: The Saṃdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra*. Berkeley: Dharma.
- Purser, Ronald. 2015. “The Myth of the Present Moment.” *Mindfulness* 6 (3): 680-686.
- Robertson, S. Ian. 2017. “Chapter 1: What is Involved in Problem Solving.” In *Problem Solving: Perspectives from Cognition and Neuroscience*. 2nd edition. Abingdon: Routledge, 1-26.
- Sharf, Robert. 2014. “Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan.” *Philosophy East and West* 64 (4): 933-963.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. 2012. *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*. Translated by Sherab Chodzin Kohn. Boston: Shambhala.
- Tripāṭhī, Chandrabhāl. 1962. *Fünfundzwanzig Sūtras des Nidānasamyukta (Sanskrittexte aus den Turfanfunden, vol. 8)*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Tsai, Yao-ming. 2014. “Non-dualistic Middle Path of the *Kātyāyana-sūtra*.” *Yuan Kuang Journal of Buddhist Studies* 24: 1-31.
- _____. 2018. “Meditative Practices in the Context of Constructing and Understanding the Spatial World.” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11/4: 515-531.
- _____. 2020. “A Philosophical Study of Time Based on the ‘Chapter on the Examination of Time’ of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*.” *Satyābhisamaya: A Buddhist Studies Quarterly* 93: 5-36.
- Vaidya, P. L. 1960. (ed.) *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute.

- Wittmann, Marc., & Schmidt, Stefan. 2014. "Mindfulness Meditation and the Experience of Time." In *Meditation: Neuroscientific Approaches and Philosophical Implications*. Edited by Stefan Schmidt and Harald Walach, Cham: Springer, 199-210.
- Wogihara, U. 1932. (ed.) *Abhisamayālaṅkāṛ 'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*. Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko.

An Examination of Temporality in Mindfulness Meditation

Yao-ming Tsai

(National Taiwan University / Professor)

Mindfulness meditation is a way to steady the mind from the ground up and maintain awareness of the actual activities of one's body, feelings, mind, and related factors. Nowadays, more and more people emphasize present-moment awareness as a key feature of mindfulness exercises and consequently regard mindfulness as the art of being in the present moment. However, from a temporal perspective, the present is constantly fluctuating. To what extent is mindfulness about present moment awareness and what role do the past and future play in that awareness? This paper seeks to address this issue by exploring the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (The Discourse on the Ways of Attending to Mindfulness) and other Buddhist texts on meditative practices. If mindfulness is to be developed to its maximum capacity, including meditative absorption (Pāli, *jhāna*), meditative concentration (Pāli, *samādhi*) and *nibbāna*, then just focusing on the present moment and non-judgmentally observing our experiences will not be enough, both theoretically and practically, to achieve many of the stated goals of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This paper proposes that, theoretically, a philosophy of time and temporality is required to answer the difficult question of how mindfulness and meditative absorption

are possible while the present is non-abiding, and practically, a more comprehensive strategy to deal with the past, future and present is also essential in overcoming the overall suffering of existence.

Keywords: temporality, mindfulness, Buddhist meditation, *nibbāna*, *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

2020년	6월 24일	투고
2020년	9월 27일	심사완료
2020년	9월 29일	게재확정