

## Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach

# 18

John D. Dunne

Over the last several years, various authors have examined contemporary conceptions of mindfulness in relation to Buddhist notions. Some authors maintain that contemporary approaches to mindfulness deviate significantly from the authentic Buddhist approach, while others see more alignment between contemporary approaches and some traditional styles of practice. The differing opinions in this regard can be confusing, and the aim of this chapter is to lessen that confusion by offering an overview of key Buddhist approaches to mindfulness in a manner that enables researchers to make appropriate use of Buddhist sources. In particular, this chapter presents heuristic categories that sort Buddhist theories and practices into two distinct styles, the “Classical” and the “Nondual,” and compares them to contemporary approaches to mindfulness, especially in relation to three crucial aspects of formal practice: ethics, judgment, and present-centered awareness.

### Why Examine Buddhist Sources?

There are three reasons why it is useful for mindfulness researchers and clinicians to be familiar with Buddhist accounts. The first and most obvious

is simply that most clinical adaptations of mindfulness are explicitly based at least partially on Buddhist practices, with the most obvious case being Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Hence, to understand the features of a clinical use of mindfulness that are based on Buddhist sources, it makes sense to examine the Buddhist practices and theories that inspired them. A second reason for examining Buddhist approaches to mindfulness is that the rich theoretical literature of various Buddhist traditions can provide insights or suggest lines of research that might not otherwise be obvious. For example, many contemporary accounts of mindfulness recognize a feature of mindfulness whereby one experiences a thought (such as the memory of a stressful conversation) as just a mental event. When experienced this way, the thought is no longer taken to be the actual event (the stressful conversation) that it represents. This phenomenon is variously called “decentering” (Safran & Segal, 1990), “reperceiving” (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), “cognitive insight” (Chambers, Gullone, & Allen, 2009), “mindful awareness” (Papies, Barsalou, & Custers, 2012), “defusion” (Hayes, 2003), and so on. As shown below, Buddhist materials offer a detailed theoretical account of how this phenomenon occurs, and examining that account may suggest avenues of scientific research into the mechanisms that underlie the phenomenon.

---

J.D. Dunne (✉)  
Department of Religion, Emory University,  
Atlanta, GA, USA  
e-mail: [jdunne@emory.edu](mailto:jdunne@emory.edu)

A third reason to examine Buddhist sources is more complex. In brief, Buddhist traditions promote multiple approaches to mindfulness, and these approaches involve different techniques that occur with different theoretical accounts. Certain kinds of techniques and theories tend to occur together, and this tendency toward coherence can prove helpful in examining the coherence of one's own approach. For example, some Buddhist styles of mindfulness require the suspension of all judgment, including ethical judgment, during formal practice. For these styles, if during formal practice, one is seeking to make judgments such as "This mental state is wholesome," or "This mental state is unwholesome," then one has deviated from the practice instructions (see below and also Dunne, 2011b). In Buddhist texts, these practice styles tend to occur with theoretical discussions about the aforementioned capacity for decentering. In contrast, practice styles that require explicit judgment or ethical discernment during formal practice do not tend to discuss decentering explicitly in their traditional texts. This suggests some coherence between the suspension of ethical judgment in formal practice and the use of decentering as a clearly theorized contemplative technique. In contrast, if one's own contemporary approach requires ethical judgment during formal practice but also emphasizes decentering, then one is challenging the usual paradigms in Buddhist sources. In this way, this third reason for examining Buddhist sources is essentially that they can help one to detect the ways in which contemporary approaches either align with or depart from typical Buddhist practice styles and theoretical accounts. In cases where there is alignment, appreciating the varieties of Buddhist approaches can help one to determine which particular Buddhist tradition will be most helpful for prompting possible avenues of further inquiry. And where there is no such alignment, it may suggest that contemporary approaches are assuming some other kind of coherence that stands in clear contrast to typical Buddhist approaches.

## Methodological Issues

The approach to Buddhist sources suggested here requires one to acknowledge that there is no single authoritative Buddhist account of mindfulness. Methodologically, this way of using Buddhist sources stands in contrast to some recent work (for example, Rappay & Bystrisky, 2009; Wallace, 2006) that adopts what can be called a "rhetoric of authenticity" whereby contemporary approaches are compared to "original," "authentic," or "authoritative" Buddhist sources that allegedly provide the true account of mindfulness. These claims to authenticity are highly problematic for a number of reasons. First, on the basis of Buddhist texts and observable Buddhist practices, it is clear that there is not just one traditional Buddhist version of mindfulness (Table 18.1) (Gethin, 2011, 2015; Sharf, 2014). Each Buddhist tradition might claim that it harbors the correct version of mindfulness, but from the standpoint of academic scholarship on Buddhism, no tradition can claim that its practice is identical to some original, authentic practice taught by the Buddha. Instead, scholarly research shows that Buddhist traditions necessarily change over time, largely in response to changes within their own cultural contexts (Braun, 2013; Harvey, 1990; Sharf, 1995; Van Schaik, 2004). Thus, to

**Table 18.1** Traditional sources of mindfulness with geographical origin

<i>Classical</i>
Vipassanā (mainstream Theravāda in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka)
Śamatha (Tibetan; especially Gelugpa approach)
Mind Training (as formal practice; Tibetan)
<i>Nondual</i>
Chan (China)
Zen (Japan; derived from Chan)
Seon (Korea; derived from Chan)
Mahāmudrā (Tibetan)
Dzogchen (Tibetan)
Thai Forest Tradition (Thailand; Nondual with Classical features)

produce some single, authentic, and authoritative account of mindfulness in Buddhism, not only must one ignore the diversity of views across Buddhist traditions, but one must also ignore the historical development of individual traditions themselves.

Another problem with the notion of “authenticity” is that it assumes that Buddhist practices and theories have a direct, linear relationship to contemporary accounts of mindfulness. The reality is far more complex, as Kabat-Zinn (2011) has shown. Throughout history, whenever Buddhism emerges in new cultural contexts, new forms of Buddhism arise that draw in complex ways on multiple Buddhist traditions (Gethin, 1998), and this certainly applies to the forms of Buddhist practice that are emerging in Europe and North America (Goldstein, 2002; McMahan, 2008; Tweed, 1992). Although MBSR, for example, is not a Buddhist tradition, its relationship to Buddhist sources is similarly complex. Multiple contemplative traditions, some of them not Buddhist, have been important sources for the development of MBSR (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Similarly, multiple sources led to the emergence of Buddhist practices such as modern forms of Buddhist mindfulness practice in Burma (Braun, 2013) or the emergence of Chan dialogues in medieval China (McRae, 2003). Claiming that MBSR, medieval Chinese Chan, or modern Burmese Vipassanā are somehow “inauthentic” because they emerge from multiple influences requires one to deny the historical reality of change and transformation that characterizes all contemplative traditions.

A final methodological issue concerns the use of Buddhist texts. In brief, what a text says about a practice does not necessarily reflect the way a community actually engages in that practice. In many cases, textual accounts are meant to be normative—they do not necessarily *describe* what practitioners *actually* do; instead, they often *prescribe* what practitioners *should* do (see, for example, the famed *Stages of Meditation* discussed in Adam, 2003). Likewise, one might assume that theoretical accounts about the features of contem-

plative practices are rooted in careful observations of those practices themselves. However, some theorizing may be driven even more strongly by a need to present a systematic and easily defended account. The upshot is that one cannot assume that a Buddhist theoretical account of mindfulness is just about the actual practice of mindfulness itself; the need to defend a tradition against critics and the urge toward scholastic systematicity may be equally strong motivations.

Does all this mean that we cannot resort to Buddhist sources if we wish to deepen our understanding of mindfulness? This would be an overreaction. We can still use these sources, but we must do so with care. In particular, these sources are best engaged along with the practical expertise of an actual practice community. Texts ideally should be read in relation to the living practices of such communities, and those practices should likewise be studied independently of textual interpretations through methods such as ethnography. Likewise, multiple traditions should participate in the conversation with texts and practices in dialog across languages, cultures, and contexts. At this point in the development of Contemplative Studies, however, this type of research is not yet available; indeed, undertaking that research will require much collaborative work across multiple disciplines. Until this lacuna is filled, our examination of mindfulness in Buddhism will be problematic, but this chapter nevertheless attempts to embrace the basic principle that texts, traditions, and actual practice stand in a complex relationship.

---

### **Heuristics for Mindfulness: Contemporary, Classical, and Nondual**

With these methodological issues in place, we can now move on to the main goal of this chapter: the heuristic presentation of two overall styles of Buddhist practice that align—or misalign—with contemporary approaches to mindfulness, especially in relation to the role of ethics, judgment,

and present-centered awareness in formal practice. To proceed, however, we must first sketch the heuristic categories that enable this type of analysis. The first is “Contemporary Mindfulness,” a category that seeks to capture the main features of contemporary approaches in clinical contexts. Of course, even within clinical circles, the term “mindfulness” has a broad range of application. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), for example, presents a style of mindfulness that differs in important ways from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Chambers et al., 2009). Nevertheless, one can point to some features that are consistent across these various contexts. We refer to this cluster of features with the general rubric “Contemporary Mindfulness.”

The widely accepted features of Contemporary Mindfulness can be gleaned by reviewing the common elements in formal training according multiple sources (including Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Shapiro et al., 2006). The initial stages involve bringing the attention to an object, most commonly the breath. The modality of this attention and the type of object selected must both be present-centered. For example, one does not take as one’s object a past or future event, and one attends to the object in such a way that attention remains in the present. This is commonly accomplished by using the sensations of breathing or some other sensory stimulus as an object, since sensory stimuli occur uniquely in the present. When one attempts to remain attentive to such an object, distractions arise, especially for novice practitioners. When distractions occur, one notices the distraction in a non-judgmental fashion that neither elaborates conceptually nor judges the moment of distraction as good or bad, and so on. Having non-judgmentally noticed that one has been distracted, one simply disengages from the distractor and reorients attention to the target object

As described above, the basic skills cultivated through formal training in Contemporary Mindfulness include: (1) holding an object in sustained, present-centered attention; (2) monitoring

awareness for distractions in a non-judgmental fashion; (3) non-reactively disengaging from distractors; and (4) reorienting attention to the target object. These general features of formal training in Contemporary Mindfulness relate to some other aspects common to programs such as MBSR. Commensurate with the emphasis on remaining present-centered while suspending frameworks for judgment, the MBSR approach does not expect practitioners to learn evaluative or ethical frameworks to use as a tool of formal mindfulness practice, nor are practitioners provided with any normative goals, not even the simple goal, “MBSR will reduce your stress” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). These features appear to be broadly typical of Contemporary Mindfulness, and they are especially appropriate to a comparison with Buddhist traditions.

To compare Contemporary Mindfulness to Buddhist approaches, we sort Buddhist practice styles and theories into two heuristic categories: “Classical” and “Nondual.” As heuristics, these terms are not meant to refer to single Buddhist traditions or lineages of practice. Rather, they point to general trends that apply across a broad range of practices and traditions that can be usefully distinguished in this way. The term “Classical” (Cf. Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009) evokes the styles of contemplative practice that are rooted most directly in the *Abhidharma* (Pali, *Abhidhamma*)<sup>1</sup>, a group of scholastic traditions whose earliest texts belong to the formative period of Buddhist history. Among living traditions, the Theravāda lineages and their practice styles (such as Vipassanā) acknowledge the *Abhidharma* to contain the most precise and detailed accounts of meditative practices (Anālayo, 2003; Bodhi, 2011; Gethin, 2011). Within Tibetan traditions, the relevant “Classical” styles are found in the literature on Mind Training (Gzön nu rgyal mchog & Dkon mchog rgyal

<sup>1</sup>Because Sanskrit has the broadest range of application, technical Buddhist terms are given in Sanskrit. However, because discussions of mindfulness often involve Pali (the language used by Theravāda traditions), it is occasionally cited with its Sanskrit equivalent. Terms drawn from Tibetan contexts are cited in Tibetan.

mtshan, 2006) and *śamatha*, especially as practiced by the Tibetan Gelugpa school (Tsong kha pa, 2002) and as presented by Alan Wallace (2006). In these contexts as well, the *Abhidharma* approach is generally considered indispensable in the analysis of meditative states, and the practice techniques for mindfulness overlap considerably with Theravāda approaches. Several centuries after the formation of the *Abhidharma*, however, other styles of practice emerged in India, from where they later spread to Tibet and China (and then to other Asian cultures such as Korea and Japan that initially draw on Chinese Buddhism). Some of these later practices required a stance that departed in key ways from the *Abhidharma* paradigm. In particular, some traditions emphasized meditative practices that were meant to be “nondual,” in that the meditator paradigmatically cultivates states without any subject–object duality. As discussed below, this emphasis on nondual states required a departure from some aspects of the Classical approach of the *Abhidharma* and led to contemplative styles, including traditions still active today, that can be collectively characterized as “Nondual.”

---

## Classical Mindfulness<sup>2</sup>

Classical Mindfulness is a heuristic category that points to certain shared features of a range of Buddhist practices that mostly closely and explicitly align with the *Abhidharma* paradigm. The shared features of the Classical approach are especially rooted in a model of mind whereby, in ordinary persons, mental moments arise with a number of different “mental facets” (*caitasika*) including affective features (such as attraction and aversion) and intentions (*cetana*) that can themselves be expressed in subsequent mental activities or vocal or physical actions. This model is developed in the context of Buddhist concerns

about the “suffering” (*duḥkha*) or fundamental dissatisfaction that is understood to characterize ordinary life, and the model likewise explains how contemplative practices can address this problem.

According to the Classical model suffering arises primarily due to intentions (*cetana*) that induce suffering (*duḥkha*) because they are produced by distorted cognitions that lead to dysfunctional actions and mental states. These cognitions are distorted in that they misinterpret their objects to be conducive to pleasure or happiness (*sukha*), whereas they are actually conducive to pain or suffering (*duḥkha*). Likewise, these cognitions interpret things that are actually impermanent (*anitya*) to be permanent (*nitya*). They also falsely cognize their objects to be somehow related to an autonomous self (*ātman*), but those objects are actually “selfless” (*anātman*) in that they are not related to or constitutive of any such self. These distorted intentions and cognitions also induce—and are perpetuated by—negative mental states (*kleśa*) such as attachment and aversion that also produce suffering. A primary goal of Classical Buddhist contemplative practice is thus to put an end to distorted intentions by realizing, in a state generally known as “insight” (*vipaśyanā*), that the objects of sensory experience and the conditioned aspects of the mind are, in fact, by their nature characterized by three marks: they are impermanent, selfless, and conducive to suffering.

The *Abhidharma* analysis points to several mental facets and capacities that must be cultivated in order to achieve insight, but two are especially important: they are *smṛti* (Pali, *sati*) and *samprajanya* (Pali, *sampajañña*). The term *smṛti* is usually translated as “mindfulness,” and although it has a wide range of application, in technical *Abhidharma* accounts it concerns especially the stability and focus that are required for the practitioner to see the true nature of objects as the three marks of impermanence and so on. *Samprajanya*, although also variable in its usage, is usually translated in Classical contexts as “clear comprehension” so as to evoke its primary cognitive role in the clear apprehension of the aforementioned three marks.

---

<sup>2</sup> An abundance of sources is available for exploring what is here called the Classical style. This section is based on the following: (Anālayo, 2003; Anuruddha & Bodhi, 2000; Asanga, 2001; Bodhi, 2011; Buddhaghosa & Ñāṇamoli, 1976; Gethin, 2011, 2015; Tsong kha pa, 2002; Vasubandhu, 2012).

## Ethics in Classical Practice

To achieve the requisite degrees of mindfulness and clear comprehension for insight, the practitioner must employ contemplative techniques such as “mindfulness of breathing” (Pali, *ānāpānasati*) that involve focus on a specific object such as the breath. These techniques, however, cannot be used if the mind is chaotic, and since mental chaos arises from an abundance of negative mental states (*kleśa*) in the mind, the practitioner must also adopt a lifestyle that reduces negative mental states. This lifestyle is regulated by *śīla*, an ethical code that is designed to reduce the abundance and influence of negative mental states in the practitioner’s mind. The practice thus involves an additional mental capacity: *apramāda*, the “heedfulness” that keeps track of one’s ethical vows, spiritual intentions and goals. This capacity, especially prominent in later Tibetan accounts in the Classical style (for example, Tsong kha pa, 2002), requires practitioners to be vigilant in their awareness of their mental lives so as to detect when distorted intentions and negative mental states are about to lead to vocal or physical actions that violate the ethical code. This attentiveness to mental life also draws on and enhances both mindfulness and clear comprehension, since they are required for one to notice and properly understand what is happening in one’s mind. In the context of formal practice, the ethical framework provided by *śīla* also provides the means to recognize the valence of one’s mental states as either “to be adopted” (*upādeya*) because they are wholesome or “to be abandoned” (*heya*) because they are unwholesome.

## Informal Practice in the Classical Style

The features of Classical mindfulness presented thus far concern the context of formal meditation practice, but all Buddhist traditions recognize a distinction between formal practice contexts and informal or “between session” contexts. In formal practice, the practitioner is meant to implement an instruction set of specific contemplative techniques for the cultivation of mindfulness,

while during informal or between-session contexts, that instruction set is replaced with some other paradigm that seeks to prepare the practitioner for the next formal session, often by implementing mindfulness in ordinary activities. Paradigmatically, Buddhist traditions also generally seek to cultivate in practitioners the capacity to sustain in all contexts the key features targeted by contemplative training, both during formal practice in a meditation session and during other activities between sessions. Thus, for the advanced practitioner, the distinction between formal and informal practice begins to collapse.

In the Classical style, both formal and informal practice require the practitioner to maintain a heedful awareness of their activities in ethical terms. Two strategies for maintaining ethical restraint in informal practice are common. As the Sanskrit author Śāntideva (ca. 650 C.E.) puts it, if necessary one “remains like a piece of wood” when one notices that one is about to engage in unethical behaviors (Śāntideva, 2008). Here, regulation of behavior essentially amounts to a “veto” of distorted intentions and negative mental states that have been heedfully detected before they actually result in unethical vocal or physical acts. Another strategy employed by more advanced practitioners is to prevent unethical behaviors by no longer having the distorted intentions that are said to motivate all unethical action. To do so, the practitioner must see objects and conditioned mental events as conducive to suffering, impermanent, and selfless, since intentions are distorted only when one fails to recognize these three marks. For example, using the first strategy, a monk might see an attractive person, and seeing that person as an object of pleasure, he might experience lust (a negative mental state) that occurs with or induces an intention to act in a way that would violate his vows. Having heedfully noticed this lustful intention before it results in a behavior, the monk would recall his vows and exercise restraint. But following the second strategy, when the monk sees the attractive person, he would no longer experience that person as an object of pleasure because he would recognize that what he is experiencing is in fact not conducive to pleasure, but rather to suffering.

Here, there is no need to exercise a veto on action because the distorted intentions that would lead to unethical or unwholesome behavior simply do not arise.

### **Contemporary Mindfulness and Classical Buddhist Styles: Ethics, Judgment, Memory**

Some contemplative techniques used in Contemporary Mindfulness align closely with Classical Buddhist approaches. For example, the cultivation of mindfulness and clear comprehension through formal Buddhist practices involve some skills also developed by formal training in Contemporary Mindfulness. These include the cultivation of sustained attention on an object, the capacity to detect distractors, and the ability to drop distractors and reorient to the target object in a way that does not perturb the mind further. However, as Rupert Gethin, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Alan Wallace, and others have noted, Contemporary Mindfulness differs from Classical Buddhist practices in significant ways. Perhaps most obvious is the prominent role played by ethics in the Classical paradigm.

In contrast to Classical practices, Contemporary Mindfulness does not emphasize a paradigmatic ethical framework that must be strictly adopted by each practitioner. Certainly, core values such as loving kindness and compassion, which are also essential to the Buddhist paradigm, are central to Contemporary Mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006), but these are not presented as constituting a specific ethical code that each practitioner must adopt. One reason for this difference may be that requiring a particular ethical approach would prove problematic in secular clinical contexts, where it seems far more workable to allow participants to address ethical issues from their own, personal perspectives (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Likewise, certain cultural factors surrounding religion and spirituality within modernity often favor an individualistic and personal approach to ethics, rather than strict adherence to an institutionally imposed code (McMahan, 2008). In any case, it is clear that Contemporary Mindfulness

styles do not train practitioners to lead their lives in heedful adherence to an ethical code involving specific vows, nor does one, during formal practice, use an ethical framework to assess one's mental states so as to identify some states as "to be abandoned" while others are "to be adopted."

The Classical Buddhist approach also differs from Contemporary Mindfulness in its emphasis on judgment. The Classical practitioner is ideally trained in the elaborate *Abhidharma* typology that delineates various aspects of the mind and categorizes them especially in ethical terms. In both formal and informal contexts, the Classical practitioner uses this typology to clearly judge what is occurring in the mind. For example, when a distraction arises during the practice of Mindfulness of Breathing, Classical practitioners do not simply recognize that a distraction is occurring; additionally, they clearly identify the mental state as, for example, motivated by intentions occurring with lust, and in this act of discernment, they also clearly know that lust is something to be abandoned. Likewise, Classical practice trains the practitioner in other key judgments, namely, that any conditioned object of experience is conducive to suffering, impermanent, and selfless. In short, the Classical paradigm requires the practitioner to employ judgment in a manner that explicitly connects to an ethics of what one seeks to abandon or cultivate.

In contrast, Contemporary Mindfulness emphasizes a non-judgmental approach. For example, when in formal practice a distraction occurs, practitioners are not taught to evaluate the mental state as something to be abandoned or cultivated, nor does one deploy some typology to analyze that mental moment. Instead, one simply recognizes that one is distracted and returns to the focal object (such as the sensations of breathing) without any further conceptual elaboration (typical instructions are found in Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Segal et al., 2002). Even if one argues that there is still some type of "discernment" about one's mental life that is trained through Contemporary Mindfulness, there is clearly no attempt to guide practitioners toward the full-blown deployment of ethically charged judgment found in the Classical Buddhist paradigm. In particular, there is no

explicit attempt to foster in the practitioner a judgment of objects or thoughts as conducive to suffering, impermanent, or selfless.

### Smṛti and the Role of Memory

Another point of divergence between Classical Buddhist styles and Contemporary Mindfulness is the role played by memory (Dreyfus, 2011). To address this question, however, it is first important to note some confusion about *smṛti*, the Buddhist term translated as “mindfulness” itself. As various authors have shown, *smṛti* has a wide range of application, some of which bear on its literal meaning, which is indeed “memory.” For example, in one important early text, the *Milindapaṇha*, the term *smṛti* is at one point used in a manner that evokes the “heedfulness” mentioned above, whereby to be “mindful” is to recollect and keep in mind one’s vows, ethical commitments, and spiritual goals (Wallace, 2006). Rupert Gethin (Gethin, 2015) further points out that *smṛti* (or more precisely, its Pali form *sati*) “...is most frequently defined in the Pali Nikāyas with reference to someone who is ‘mindful, possesses perfect mindfulness and understanding, one who remembers, one who recollects things done and things said long before.’” Nevertheless, despite the use of *smṛti/sati* in a manner that equates strongly with a straightforward sense of “memory,” the technical *Abhidharma* definition of *smṛti* (i.e., “mindfulness”) does not have this meaning. Instead, the sense of *smṛti* as literally “memory” is here apparently used in a metaphorical sense. That is, technical *Abhidharma* definitions of *smṛti* note that it functions so as to prevent one from “losing” (*sampramoṣa*) the object (Anuruddha & Bodhi, 2000; Asanga, 2001; Bodhi, 2011; Buddhaghosa & Ñāṇamoli, 1976; Gethin, 2011; Vasubandhu, 2012). The metaphor here appears to be that losing focus on an object is akin to “forgetting” the object, and thus the mental facet that prevents one from losing that focus can be metaphorically referred to as “remembering” (*smṛti*), since “to remember” is “not to forget.” Thus, during Mindfulness of Breathing,

for example, to maintain the mental facet *smṛti* does not mean that one “remembers” the sensations of breathing; instead, it means that one sustains attention on those sensations without becoming distracted away from them.

Even though the technical *Abhidharma* definition of the mental facet *smṛti* thus should not be understood as “memory” in any literal sense, the Classical Buddhist styles of practice nevertheless clearly involve a form of memory, especially when this is understood in contrast to the emphasis on non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in Contemporary Mindfulness. As mentioned earlier, a central theme of formal training in Contemporary Mindfulness is the need to sustain awareness in the present in a way that does not stray to thoughts of the past or future, and one is likewise not to recollect any elaborate conceptual apparatus or keep in mind any predetermined goals. This emphasis on “remaining in the now” without conceptual elaboration cannot be overstated. For Classical Buddhist styles of practice, however, memory is crucially important, especially when memory is understood in the sense of “recollecting” or “keeping in mind” a conceptual apparatus and one’s spiritual goals. In the context of formal practice, the ideal Classical practitioner must recollect the *Abhidharma* typology that enables one to monitor and recognize the various mental states as they arise, especially in terms of those states that are to be abandoned or cultivated. And this means that one’s overall spiritual goals—in terms of which mental life is to be shaped—must also be kept in mind. Thus, although the Classical styles of formal practice can be considered present-centered in that they generally do not prompt the practitioner to focus on memories of past events or future actions, they nevertheless require the retention or recollection of an elaborate conceptual apparatus. And clearly, in the context of informal practice, the Classical Buddhist style of the mindful life requires an even more intensive recollection of vows, ethics, and goals.

While Contemporary Mindfulness and Classical Buddhist styles clearly diverge on the role of memory, one point of convergence is worth noting here. Even for the practitioner of



Contemporary Mindfulness who cultivates a present-centered awareness without conceptual elaboration, a kind of recollective memory must be operative at times. This occurs most obviously at the time of distraction in formal practice, when to recognize the mental state as distracted, the practitioner must recall at least that one is to be undistracted. Or, more elaborately, one must recall that one intends to focus on the task at hand, such as remaining aware of the sensations of breathing in the present moment. This form of recollection seems akin to recollective memory in Buddhist Classical styles, but in the latter context this form of memory plays a much broader role.

As noted previously, various scholarly works have discussed the ways that Contemporary Mindfulness differs from Classical Buddhist approaches, and when one examines the issues of ethics, judgment, and memory, those divergences are indeed clear. One might thus conclude that Contemporary Mindfulness has little in common with its allegedly Buddhist roots or that it is some “watered-down” version of Buddhist meditation. Such conclusions, however, would be premature because other styles of Buddhist practice—those that cultivate “nondual” experiences—align more closely with Contemporary Mindfulness, albeit only in the context of formal practice.

---

## Nondual Buddhist Styles

As Buddhism developed in India during the first millennium (C.E.), new philosophies and contemplative approaches emerged, and some departed in important ways from the core *Abhidharma* paradigm. These styles can be grouped under the rubric “Nondual” because they seek to induce in the practitioner a state in which the subject–object structure of ordinary experiences has subsided. As this later form of Buddhism spreads, it strongly informs the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions of Tibet and the Chan traditions of China; and through Chinese Chan, Nondual styles appear in Japanese Zen and Korean Seon Buddhism. As we shall see, several aspects of these Nondual styles align more favorably with Contemporary

Mindfulness in the context of formal practice, and as Jon Kabat-Zinn notes (2011), these styles have had a direct historical impact on the development of MBSR, more so than any Classical style. To more easily understand the overall rubric of the “Nondual Style,” we examine the issue of subject–object duality and then survey a set of philosophical tools that emerge along with this insight.

## Subject–Object Duality and Suffering<sup>3</sup>

Some time near the beginning of the Common Era, various developments within Buddhism led to the emergence of the Mahāyāna or “Great Vehicle,” and this brought important changes to theories and practices around suffering and its solution. By around the third or fourth century (C.E.) a new philosophical approach emerged that reconceptualized the fundamental problem of suffering. This new approach still embraced many features of the *Abhidharma* model, especially the insight that eliminating suffering requires one to uproot the fundamental causes that make dysfunctional behavior possible. Unlike the Classical *Abhidharma* approach, however, these new thinkers claimed that the root problem lies even deeper than distorted intentions and their concomitant negative mental states. Instead, this deeper structure is what makes it even possible to have any intentions whatsoever as an agent acting on a world that, from the standpoint of an agent’s subjectivity, is “out there” (*bāhya*). In short, the subtler distortion in experience is this distinction between self and world, or more precisely, the structure of a distinct subjectivity standing over against distinct objects of experience. Articulated in a philosophical approach known as *Yogācāra* (“Practice of Yoga”) by thinkers such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (both fourth century C.E.), this theoretical account of suffering also promotes a

---

<sup>3</sup>Two useful, if competing accounts of the issues discussed in this section are Gold (2014) and Lusthaus (Lusthaus, 2002).

contemplative solution to this fundamental problem: the practitioner must cultivate an experience in which this false distinction between subject and object disappears in a nondual (*advaya*) experience.

### A Key Philosophical Tool: Phenomenal Forms<sup>4</sup>

The notion of subject–object duality as the root of suffering emerged and developed along with new philosophical tools (arising from the third to seventh centuries C.E.) that were not available during the early formation of the *Abhidharma*. One crucial new tool was the analysis of experience as involving “phenomenal forms” (*ākāra*). Specifically, Buddhist epistemologists in the Yogācāra tradition maintained that, in ordinary experience, a “phenomenal form of subjectivity” (*grāhakākāra*) always arises simultaneously with a “phenomenal form of the object” (*grāhyākāra*). On this model, a moment of visual consciousness, for example, is always divided into these two phenomenal forms, even though both forms are actually just mind itself. A visual experience of an object is thus not a direct apprehension of a thing external to consciousness; instead, what one directly contacts is a mental representation (i.e., the phenomenal form of the object) that arises through a causal process. This model thus permits one to perform a type of phenomenological reduction, such that the phenomenological form of the object may be experienced not as representing what caused it, but rather as an element in experience itself. Thus, when one experiences the color blue, that color can be experienced not as an object “out there” in the world, but rather as “just a representation” (*vijñaptimātra*) that is not actually separate from the visual consciousness itself. Likewise, the sense of subjectivity that occurs with the visual experience of blue also is just a phenomenal form that is in fact not distinct from the phenomenal form of the object, in that both are simply features of a single moment of visual awareness.

<sup>4</sup>For resources to explore this issue, see Dreyfus (1997), Dunne (2004), Arnold (2012) and Coseru (2012).

### Concept Formation<sup>5</sup>

Another crucial philosophical tool that emerged along with the nondual approach was a robust account of concept formation known as the *Apoha* theory. Developed by Buddhist epistemologists such as Dharmakīrti (seventh century C.E.) who follow the Yogācāra philosophy, only three of this complex theory’s details are relevant. First, since this theory draws on the notion of phenomenological forms, it presents concepts as also involving mental representations. Thus, the thought of an “apple” arises with a phenomenological content that is ordinarily experienced as somehow referring to or identical with actual apples. However, the phenomenological form or “mental representation” of an apple that arises when one thinks “apple” is actually just a feature of consciousness itself. Thus, as with the visual consciousness of a color, the phenomenological presentation that appears when one thinks “apple” can be experienced as what it truly is, namely, just a feature of consciousness itself. This theory enables a contemplative method whereby the disturbing thought of, for example, a stressful event can be experienced not as the object it represents (i.e., the stressful event), but rather as just a phenomenological form in consciousness. As noted above, this is the Buddhist theory that underlies the contemplative technique known in Contemporary Mindfulness by numerous terms, such as decentering, cognitive insight, mindful awareness, and defusion.

A second relevant feature of the *Apoha* theory of concept formation is the notion that all concepts are necessarily formed in an approach/avoidance context. As Dharmakīrti puts it, we do not use concepts simply out of some “bad habit”; rather, we do so because we are organizing our experience in terms of what we seek to obtain (*heya*) or what we seek to avoid or eliminate (*upādeya*). If an object is not taken into this approach/avoidance framework, the mind will not conceptualize it because it is not relevant to our actions in the world. An irrelevant object of this kind might appear as a fleeting sensory impression, but it will not go through the full-

<sup>5</sup>The account given here is based on Dunne (2004, 2011a).

blown process of conceptualization described by the *Apoha* theory. Importantly, this means that concepts are always tied to a sense of oneself as a goal-oriented agent acting in the world. And for this reason, when one uses concepts, one is necessarily operating through the dualistic self/world or subject/object structure described above.

Finally, a third relevant feature of the *Apoha* theory is that concepts necessarily involve an association of the present mental content with some previous experience. The thought of an “apple,” for example, always draws on previous experience, such that the phenomenological content presented in the thought is construed as the same kind of thing as the phenomenological content that occurred when we saw something we called an “apple” yesterday. Concepts thus necessarily draw one out of the present, at least to the extent that present experience is being associated with past experiences. Likewise, concepts often connect to anticipated future experiences, such that the phenomenological content in the present thought of an “apple” is imaginatively associated with the apples that will be bought at the store tomorrow. In the psychological literature, perhaps the most striking example of this aspect of conceptual thought is Mental Time Travel: the projection of oneself into the past or future during the mental simulations that constitute episodic memory (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Thus, when I imagine myself walking through the aisles of the supermarket in search of the best apples, I am engaged in a conceptually constructed simulation that fully pulls me out of the present moment. Likewise, when I ruminate by imaginatively reliving my failure to find good apples yesterday, this “time traveling” feature of conceptual thought is operative.

## Reflexive Awareness<sup>6</sup>

Another crucial philosophical tool that arose in support of Nondual contemplative approaches was the notion that, even in ordinary conscious-

ness, a form of nondual awareness is already occurring. Known by the technical term “reflexive awareness” (*svasamvitti*), this aspect of consciousness is nondual in the sense that when information is obtained through reflexive awareness, it does not mean that a phenomenal sense of subjectivity is focusing on that information’s source as an object. Consider, for example, the experience of an intensely beautiful sunset. During the experience, one is fully focused on the visual object, yet if asked later how one felt, one can report reliably on one’s subjective sense of awe and so on. The claim here is that one has a capacity to make a reliable report *without turning inward* and observing the features of the experience that concerned oneself as a subject. One need not make this turn because, even without having introspected in a way that makes one’s own subjectivity an object of observation, some aspect of consciousness was already aware of those subjective features. Likewise, in at least a minimal way, the sense of oneself as the subject seeing that object is already presented in the experience, even without turning inward and observing, “I am the one seeing this sunset.”

For Nondual styles of practice, reflexive awareness is important in two ways. First, reflexive awareness does not employ a subject–object structure, and second, it is present in every moment of ordinary, dualistic consciousness. On this view, it must be present because it is what accounts for the fact that dualistic experience always includes a sense of subjectivity. In the context of contemplative practice, this means that inducing a nondual state does not require developing some new capacity of awareness. Rather, it involves enhancing an innate feature of consciousness while also using techniques that make the dualistic structures subside.

## Reflexive Awareness and Monitoring

The theory of reflexive awareness has an important implication: namely, that one can cultivate a capacity to “monitor” awareness even while one is still focused on an object. It would seem that, even for Classical approaches, some type of monitoring capacity is necessary so that, especially at

<sup>6</sup>This section is based on the account given in the third chapter of Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika* as presented in Dunne (2012). See also Arnold (2012).

more advanced stages of practice, one can recognize the quality of awareness and make appropriate adjustments without losing the object of awareness. For example, it is acknowledged that advanced practitioners notice when agitation is arising and can adjust accordingly even before mindful focus on an object is actually lost. The notion of reflexive awareness provides a model whereby this monitoring can be accomplished without dropping one's focus on the object. Importantly, the historical development of reflexive awareness in the Buddhist epistemological tradition occurs along with a reinterpretation of *samprajanya*, a key faculty in the Classical model noted above. Whereas in earlier Classical materials *samprajanya* connotes a kind of "clear comprehension," it becomes reinterpreted as precisely this type of monitoring function. A clear example is found in the work of the Classical author Śāntideva (active c. 700 C.E.). Even though he explicitly rejects the Yogācāra account of reflexive awareness, he nevertheless interprets *samprajanya* as "the moment by moment examination of the state of mind and body" (Śāntideva, 2008: 5.108, *kāyacittāvasthāyāḥ pratyavekṣā muhurmuḥuḥ*) that is cultivated alongside mindfulness (*smṛti*). From the Nondual perspective, the reflexive monitoring that is employed during meditation on an object could initially be cultivated in that context. Later, one drops the object such that one remains in just the "monitoring" state, provided that the term "monitoring" does not imply a subject-object structure.

---

### **Mahāmudrā in Contrast to the Classical Style**

Nondual Buddhist styles of contemplative practice arose historically in the context of the theoretical developments sketched above, and they spread from India to other parts of Asia along with Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Tibet, Nondual approaches are found in Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen (Tibetan *rDzogs Chen*, "Great Perfection"), and in China, the various Chan traditions emerge from this style. From China, Chan then leads to Zen in Japan and Seon in Korea. In

terms of direct historical influence, the Tibetan, Japanese, and Korean Nondual styles are those that have been especially important in the development of Contemporary Mindfulness. However, it is crucial to note that even within Theravāda Buddhism, whose textual lineages are depicted as rooted in the Classical *Abhidharma* approaches, Nondual features also appear. Most notably, the Thai forest tradition as articulated in the works of the twentieth century luminary Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, has clear elements of a Nondual approach (see, for example, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, 1997).

In India, where Nondual styles appear to have originated, the clearest example of a Nondual contemplative style is found in Mahāmudrā, a tradition that emerges at the end of the first millennium from various sources, including developments within the epistemological approach to Yogācāra and tantric contemplative methods. The Mahāmudrā literature is especially useful for the way it strikes a deliberate stance in opposition to the Classical *Abhidharma* paradigm. This stance is important because the rhetoric of Nonduality—and some key instructions for contemplative practice—can only be understood through its opposition to some aspects of the Classical paradigm. For example, one important rhetorical theme (and an explicit instruction in formal practices) is that Mahāmudrā does not involve anything to be abandoned (*heya*) or anything to be accomplished or adopted (*upādeya*). This attitude does not make sense if one does not understand that it stands against the Classical approach whereby the practitioner deliberately seeks to abandon unwholesome or unethical mental states while cultivating or adopting virtues such as compassion and insight.

Maitrīpa (eleventh century C.E., also known as Advayaavajra) is an especially important Indian exponent of Mahāmudrā whose works often exhibit this "othering" of the Classical paradigm. In an especially telling example of such an inversion, he claims that what one is to cultivate is not mindfulness (*smṛti*), but "non-mindfulness" (*asmṛti*) (Higgins, 2008; Mathes, 2008). Philosophically, the point here is that in the *Abhidharma* account, mindfulness is a mental

facet that prevents the mind from losing track of its object. Employing some of the philosophical tools discussed earlier, one must conclude that mindfulness in this sense could only occur when there is subject–object duality, since the phenomenal presentation of an object necessarily occurs with the phenomenal presentation of a phenomenal subject. And since duality is the primary source of delusion, this type of mindfulness is still caught within it. If nondual experiences are what one elicits in practice, then one should not seek to cultivate mindfulness; practice should instead elicit “non-mindfulness,” which is often conceptualized as an objectless “mindfulness of mere non-distraction” (Tibetan, *ma yengs tsam gyi dran pa*).

While striking, this type of rhetoric can be misunderstood, for it may seem to imply a wholesale rejection of the Classical paradigm. This is clearly not the case, especially because the paradigm for informal practice between sessions often involves the same type of ethical heedfulness found in the Classical style (Wallis, 2003). Likewise, this type of Nondual rhetoric implies certain contemplative techniques, but the way Maitrīpa’s rhetoric maps onto actual practice in India remains unclear. As with early Chan sources in China (Sharf, 2014), the Indian sources on actual practice are often laconic at best. To examine the issue of practice in comparison with Contemporary Mindfulness, we will turn to a later formulation of Mahāmudrā in Tibet.

### Practice in Tibetan Mahāmudrā

This brief foray into the instructions for Mahāmudrā practice aims to demonstrate how a Nondual style aligns in important ways with Contemporary Mindfulness, especially in terms of the approach to judgment, memory, and ethics during formal practice. To be as specific as possible, we examine a single, widely used text, *The Ocean of Definitive Meaning* by the 9th Karmapa Wangchūg Dorjé (Karma Dbang Phyug Rdo Rje, 2006). There are two advantages to examining this text. First, presented as a manual for meditation instructors, it records many of the practice

instructions and “practical aphorisms” (*man ngag*) that continued to be used by Tibetan teachers. Second, it presents these instructions in a clear, extensive, and systematic way that is somewhat atypical in this tradition. In *Ocean*, Wangchūg Dorjé gathers together instructional materials from various sources, including perhaps some that were previously only passed through an oral tradition, and he addresses the entire scope of the Mahāmudrā ending in the full realization of “nondual primordial wisdom” (*gnyis su med pa’i ye shes*). For our purposes, we need examine only the instructions for the beginner, since they are most suited to a comparison with Contemporary Mindfulness.

*Ocean* begins with a presentation of “preliminary practices” (*sngon ‘gro*) that draw on the larger ethical and spiritual framework of the Classical approach. The beginner is thus presumed to be thoroughly trained in that framework prior to formal Mahāmudrā practice. The formal practice itself starts with the cultivation of *śamatha* or “Calm Abiding,” which then proceeds to the cultivation of the *vipaśyanā* or “Insight” through which one realizes dualistic experiences to be delusional and actually attains nondual experience. A peculiar feature of Mahāmudrā, however, is that the basic training in Calm Abiding can lead directly to Insight, and for this reason, even the beginner’s instructions are couched in a nondual rhetoric that draws on the philosophical tools discussed earlier.

### Basic Mahāmudrā Instructions for Formal Practice

In *Ocean*, the instructions for beginners are presented as “General” (*spyi*) and then “Specific” (*bye brag*). Both sets of instructions seek to cultivate “mental stability” (*sems gnas*) through “mindfulness consisting in mere non-distraction” (*ma yengs tsam gyi dran pa*) in a way that, paradigmatically, is not focused on any object. The General Instructions teach this directly, such that the beginner attempts a form of objectless meditation at the outset. Because the unusual beginners who fully succeed in implementing the

“general” instructions can proceed directly to a nondual awareness, it is said that they have already “realized Mahāmudrā” (*phyag chen rtogs pa*); that is, they have already achieved a degree of Insight. Others, however, must proceed through the Specific Instructions that teach meditations on various objects and then lead the practitioner to objectless practice.

In keeping with the rhetorical style of such traditions, the basic “General Instructions” are strikingly simple: “Do not chase the past; do not invite the future; rest the awareness occurring now in a clear and nonconceptual state.” As these instructions are unpacked, it is clear that for beginners, the main obstacle to advancement is the tendency to become caught in thoughts. Thus, when one “chases after the past,” a thought of the past does not just occur on its own, but rather leads to an entire chain of thoughts. Likewise, in “inviting the future,” the same tendency to become ensnared in a chain of thoughts pertains. This ensnarement in thought keeps the practitioner in a dualistic state because, as mentioned above, conceptual consciousness is necessarily dualistic. The practitioner is thus instructed to remain in the present, since as long as awareness remains in the present, it cannot “time travel” in the manner required for thought to operate.

### **“Let Go, Don’t Correct, Be Free of Expectation”**

To aid in cultivating present-centered awareness, the novice is given other tools that also inhibit another requirement for thought to operate, namely, the approach/avoidance stance of an agent acting in the world. Three instructions are especially frequent in this regard. First, one must “let go” (*lhod kyis glod*). Rather than direct the mind toward an object or compel it to enter into a particular state, one releases any such deliberate effort. This instruction is often accompanied by another: do not attempt to correct, adjust, or “repair” (*bcos*) the mind. And this admonition is frequently amplified by noting that one should be free of expectations especially about what one

seeks to obtain or abandon. A typical passage along these lines reads:

Thus, do not give your mind work to do. Let it go, and without meditating on anything, rest it in a relaxed, open and clear way in a state of mere non-distraction without making any adjustments at all. Relax openly into a state without expectations or judgments. In that state, do not chase the past, do not invite the future. Place awareness in the present without correction or expectation ...

The overall effect of these instructions is to encourage in practitioners the attitude that they are not engaged in anything, not even meditation. One is not to hope that will obtain something laudable or fear that something undesirable will not be abandoned. The task is not to evaluate what is occurring in the mind, nor to focus on an object. One simply remains undistracted in the present, where “mere non-distraction” in part means that one sustains an awareness that is not caught by the goal-oriented, approach/avoidance structures that pull one into a chain of thoughts.

### **“Self-Liberation” of Thoughts as “Decentering” or Dereification**

Another crucial tool offered to the novice practitioner emerges from the previously discussed theory of concept formation whereby the phenomenal content when one thinks “apple” can be experienced just as a facet of mind, rather than as somehow representing an actual apple. In Mahāmudrā terminology, this is known as the “self liberation” (*rang grol*) that occurs when one “looks intently” (*cer gyis lta*) at a thought. To do so, one must not become caught in the chain of thoughts that the thought induces; instead, one must remain present-centered and direct attention intently to the thought itself as an appearance in the present moment of mind. Beheld in this fashion, the thought subsides or “self liberates,” and it thus fails to induce a chain of thoughts about past or future. As noted previously, this closely approaches the notion known as “decentering,” “defusion,” and so on in the literature on Contemporary Mindfulness.

## Suspension of Judgment and Ethics

When Wangchûg Dorjé moves on to the “Specific Instructions” that guide practitioners who are unable to initially engage with the objectless practice discussed by the General Instructions, he explicitly addresses the suspension of the Classical ethical typology in which some mental facets are “to be abandoned” while others are “to be cultivated.” Discussing a practice where one focuses on whatever sensory or mental impression that arises, Wangchûg Dorjé comments:

In particular, thoughts as mental objects may arise. Some may be to be abandoned, such as the five poisonous mental facets that are attachment, aversion and so on. Some may be virtues to be adopted, such as generosity. And some may be neutral. But whatever thought arises, one should one-pointedly attend to it and settle [awareness on it such that the thought self liberates]. Some say that one should deliberately suppress thoughts to be abandoned, but if one does so, then it will just increase conceptuality and it will be difficult for concentration (*samādhi*) to arise. Therefore, whatever thought arises, one should not see the thought as a fault, one should just let it go and intently settle on the thought itself. Without for a moment falling into a scattered state, recognize each thought, one after the other. Then rest for a while.

Here, the typology of negative mental states to be abandoned and virtues to be cultivated has been set aside, since in this context judgments of that kind will simply proliferate and ensnare the practitioner further in thought. Nevertheless, the rationale for setting aside the Classical typology is not that the framework is itself somehow faulty, but rather that in formal Mahāmudrā practice, any such conceptuality will be an obstacle. This clearly leaves a place for that ethical framework in other contexts.

## Mindfulness in Mahāmudrā

Another crucial feature of the instructions for the beginner is the notion of mindfulness (Tibetan, *dran pa*) itself. In *Ocean*, the General Instructions speak of a “mindfulness that is mere nondistraction,” and in part this clearly consists in a capac-

ity to sustain awareness without becoming caught in thoughts. Unpacking this further, in the Specific Instructions Wangchûg Dorjé suggests an exercise that involves staring intently at a visual object such as a small stone. He elaborates:

Without thinking of its features such as thickness, length or color, just release what is seen into its own place and, without distraction, make it such that the continuity of mindfulness is just not cut. That focal object of meditation [i.e., the stone, etc.] is just a reminder or prompt. Hence, directing the gaze of mere non-distraction toward it, one lets go and settles awareness. It is not the case that one is meditating on that object.

In this passage, mindfulness is not a faculty that maintains stable attention on an object; if that were the case, one would indeed be meditating on the stone. Instead, it is the mere non-distraction of the mind that does indeed occur when the mind is settled on an object, but (at least for Mahāmudrā) can also occur in objectless states. This then relates to another term that Wangchûg Dorjé uses, the “spy of mindfulness” (*dran pa'i so pa*).

Wangchûg Dorjé uses the metaphor of the spy or lookout at several places in *Ocean*, but the metaphor is most prominent when connected to meditation on objects. The “spy” is the aspect of mind that observes the quality of the object-focused state in a manner that appears to be similar to the monitoring function of reflexive awareness mentioned above. The exact relationship between mindfulness as a “spy” and mindfulness as mere non-distraction is not entirely clear, but it appears that the capacity to monitor one’s attention is a coarser version of mere non-distraction. If this is correct, then training through object-focused meditation can lead to an objectless practice of mere non-distraction precisely because monitoring and mere non-distraction draw on the same objectless, reflexive aspect of awareness<sup>7</sup>. It is clear, in any case, that Wangchûg

<sup>7</sup>This is certainly the opinion of another Mahāmudrā author, Tsélé Natsôg Rangdröl (rTse le sna tshogs rang grol, b. 1608), who understands mindfulness to be the reflexive monitoring aspect of *śamatha* and who sees that mindfulness as itself becoming nondual insight (Sna tshogs rang grol & Kunsang, 2009).

Dorjé sees object-focused practice as a means to create a state where one need only drop the object so as to transition to the main practice described in the General Instructions. In short, to cite Wangchûg Dorjé's own citation of a well-known Sanskrit verse, "Relying on object focus, the objectless state arises."

---

## Mahāmudrā and Contemporary Mindfulness

When compared to the Classical Buddhist paradigm, the basic instructions for formal Mahāmudrā practice differ starkly on the issues of judgment, memory, and ethics. Clearly, Mahāmudrā formal instructions require one to be "non-judgmental," in that one is not to engage with any conceptual evaluation during formal practice. Instead, one releases all expectations or evaluative paradigms, and when distracting thoughts occur, one does not judge them as virtuous or non-virtuous. Instead, one simply "looks intently" at the thought in the present moment and, having been experienced as just a feature of mind itself, the thought "self liberates" or dissipates on its own. Since all conceptual judgment is suspended, one also does not recollect any typology for the evaluation of thoughts, since one would then be "chasing after the past." Likewise, as shown clearly above, the ethical framework of the Abhidharma paradigm must also be suspended during formal practice.

At first glance, then, basic Mahāmudrā practice clearly aligns much more closely with some key features of Contemporary Mindfulness, including the emphasis on being present-centered and the non-judgmental stance of practice. And this should come as no surprise, since Nondual Buddhist traditions are key sources for the development of Contemporary Mindfulness. Further research on contemplative theory and techniques in Zen and Seon, for example, would surely reveal similar parallels (see, for example, Kim, 2007). The alignment of Nondual styles with Contemporary Mindfulness further suggests that the theoretical Buddhist background on concept formation, monitoring, and reflexivity, for example,

may prove useful for inquiring into the mechanisms of mindfulness and its features such as decentering or cognitive insight. In any case, if one were to compare Contemporary Mindfulness only with the Classical Buddhist paradigm, one might conclude that its account of formal practice departs in significant and troubling way from its Buddhist roots. When one turns to Nondual styles, however, the techniques for formal practice appear quite similar.

## A Difference Between Sessions

In other ways, however, Contemporary Mindfulness still differs significantly from the Mahāmudrā approach. The most crucial issue is the role of context, especially in relation to spiritual goals and ethics. Although the instructions for formal Mahāmudrā practice require practitioners to set aside any goal-oriented stance, one becomes eligible for such instruction only after an intensive period of training in "preliminary practices" that instill, for example, an intense concern for the suffering of others and a strong motivation to become capable of relieving that suffering. Moreover, every meditation session begins with a rehearsal of these preliminary practices, most especially those that refresh one's commitment to that goal. Only then does the session proceed to the actual Mahāmudrā practice in which all such concerns are set aside.

Likewise, ethics play an important role in the larger context of Mahāmudrā practice. It is true that this tradition admits room for the "Madman" (Tibetan, *smyon pa*), the highly realized practitioner whose antinomian behavior transcends all ethical categories (DiValerio, 2011). Yet, in social terms, the image of the Madman also serves to locate the novice practitioner squarely within the practice of the Classical Buddhist ethical code, for as a novice, one cannot hope to enjoy the Nondual insight that is depicted in the figure of the Madman. His excesses often serve to highlight the standard ethical and institutional norms.

In the context of informal practice between sessions, both the Nondual and the Classical



approaches require the practitioner to adopt a paradigm of the proper Buddhist life along with its ethical norms. Nondual traditions claim that this ethical paradigm is somehow an innate capacity that emerges naturally, but setting this aside for the moment, one can instead hypothesize that the disagreement here is about the methods in formal practice that best facilitate the adoption of the Buddhism life paradigm between sessions. The Classical traditions emphasize techniques that reinforce and amplify the paradigm during formal practice. In contrast, the Nondual approach appears to be based on an insight: namely, that techniques which purport to set aside all paradigms during formal practice will more readily facilitate the adoption of the new paradigm during informal practice between sessions. It may further be the case that these approaches both persist in many Buddhist cultural contexts because they are found to be effective in producing similar behavioral results for persons with different cognitive or affective styles.

Turning to Contemporary Mindfulness, it is clear that the techniques for formal practice align significantly with those found in Mahāmudrā, and it is possible to demonstrate a similar alignment with other Nondual traditions such as Dzogchen and Zen (see, for example, Suzuki, 2006 and Van Schaik, 2004). A significant divergence emerges, however, when one examines the approach to contexts outside of formal practice. Here, in what is termed the “between session” context, Dorjé’s *Ocean* instructs Mahāmudrā practitioners to adopt and enact the core features of Classical style’s paradigm, including an emphasis on a heedful engagement with the world in a way that avoids unethical activity and cultivates virtues such as generosity and compassion. Nondual traditions such as Mahāmudrā will claim that this ethical engagement emerges naturally from the innate capacities of the practitioner (for more on the “Innateism” in Nondual traditions, see Dunne, 2011b), but even with this innateist or nativist rhetoric in place, practitioners are still explicitly and extensively trained in the ethical paradigm that they are to adopt between sessions. Contemporary Mindfulness, in contrast, does not usually promote any explicit ethical

framework of that kind. It would appear that, similar to Mahāmudrā, an appeal is made to the emergence of innate capacities (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), but unlike Mahāmudrā, there is no notion that, despite the innateist rhetoric, an explicit paradigm is still necessary.

If one examines the reasons for the Mahāmudrā tradition’s promotion of an explicit ethical framework between sessions, one possibility is that, if left simply to rely on the emergence of allegedly innate qualities, some practitioners at various stages of development will not exhibit the types of behaviors and personal transformation that the tradition seeks. By training practitioners in an explicit paradigm between sessions, the tradition thus “guarantees,” in a sense, that only the allegedly innate qualities of wisdom, compassion and so on emerge, rather than some other outcome that results when the between session framework is just left to the practitioner. In any case, a clear assumption here is that some kind of framework for engagement with the world must be present between sessions, even if one seeks to suspend all such frameworks during formal practice.

If rather than some kind of innate, natural engagement with the world, practitioners instead necessarily deploy learned (or personally invented) paradigms and frameworks for practice between sessions, how would this apply to Contemporary Mindfulness? One possibility is that, even in the absence of an explicit framework, an *implicit* one is being provided. In MBSR, for example, that framework would emerge from the use of carefully selected poems by Rumi, Mary Oliver, and others. Education in the physiology of stress would be another component. These and other aspects of MBSR training may suggest some key elements in a framework for engagement with the world that practitioners then complete through their own creative appropriation of other sources and their life histories. This does not in itself seem problematic, but if the self-invented paradigm goes in certain directions, it does leave itself open to the critique of the cultural critique Slavoj Žižek (2001, 2012). In effect, he maintains that mindfulness has become popular because it serves to dampen the distress and horror of global capitalism.

During sessions, one alleviates the pain, and between sessions, one returns to being a good producer and consumer. Mindfulness thus becomes the opiate of the elite. While Žižek’s critique is typically hyperbolic, it may not entirely miss the mark.

**Conclusion: Using the Heuristic**

In practical terms, the heuristic account presented here can enable researchers to identify various styles of mindfulness and assess their coherence relative to Buddhist sources. The Buddhist traditions that generally exhibit these styles are grouped according to their approach in Table 18.1, but the reality is that sub-traditions and individual teachers will fall along a spectrum. Some will strongly exhibit Classical tendencies; others may be clearly Nondual, and yet others (such as the Thai Forest tradition) may fall somewhere between these poles. At the same time, as Table 18.2 illustrates, certain features of formal practice tend to coalesce together in accord with Buddhist theoretical accounts, and from that standpoint, some approaches will appear incoherent. One might maintain, for example, that the target state in formal meditation requires one to be present-centered and non-judgmental, and yet one might also insist that this state retains ethical discernment. It is difficult to see how this approach could be theoretically coherent from a Buddhist standpoint, since ethical discernment would require a form of conceptuality that is not present-centered. This incoherence relative to Buddhist sources does not mean that such an approach is necessarily wrongheaded. Instead, it calls for the development of a new theoretical account that explains its coherence and thus leads to hypotheses about mechanisms and ways to assess outcomes empirically.

Another clear research agenda that emerges from this heuristic is the examination of the crucial role played by the context assumed or deliberately created for informal practice between sessions. In actual training, both Classical and Nondual Buddhist styles work hard to create a lifeworld for practitioners structured around a

**Table 18.2** Classical and nondual: features of target state in formal practice

	Classical	Nondual
<i>Object focus</i>	Meditative states always have an object	Novices may use an object, but eventually all objects are dropped
<i>Ethical judgment</i>	Required	Suspended
<i>Conceptual schemas</i>	Vows recollected and Abhidharma categories used	All conceptual schemas suspended
<i>Present-centeredness</i>	Not fully present-centered so as to allow for ethical judgment and recollection of vows and Abhidharma schema	Always present-centered

paradigm of the ideal Buddhist and the proper way to engage with the world. The personal transformation that occurs through contemplative practice is thus not just a matter of what occurs “on the cushion.” It also depends heavily on the way the world is imagined before and after. How does this between-session paradigm interact with techniques in formal practice? To effect personal transformation, are some practitioners best served by the Classical approach, where the paradigm is a prominent feature of formal practice? And for others, is a Nondual approach better? That is, do these practitioners more easily alter their lives to a new paradigm between sessions by using a formal practice that suspends all paradigms? Could it be that one approach or another will be better for an individual at different points along a developmental trajectory? These are some of the many questions that this heuristic engagement with Buddhist sources can suggest.

**References**

Adam, M. T. (2003). *Meditation and the concept of insight in Kamalaśīla’s “Bhāvanākramas”* (Doctoral Dissertation). Canada: McGill University.  
 Anālayo. (2003). *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*. Birmingham, AL: Windhorse.

- Anuruddha & Bodhi. (2000). *A comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma: The Abhidhammattha sangaha of Ācariya Anuruddha*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Edition.
- Arnold, D. A. (2012). *Brains, Buddhas, and believing: The problem of intentionality in classical Buddhist and cognitive-scientific philosophy of mind*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Asanga. (2001). *Abhidharmasamuccaya: The compendium of the higher teaching*. (Walpola Rahula & S. Boin-Webb, trans.). Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press.
- Bishop, S. R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N. D., Carmody, J., . . . , Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11*, 230–241.
- Bodhi, B. (2011). What does mindfulness really mean? A canonical perspective. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*, 19–39.
- Braun, E. (2013). *The birth of insight meditation: Modern Buddhism and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. (1997). *Mindfulness with breathing: A manual for serious beginners* (Santikaro Bhikkhu, trans.). Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Buddhaghosa & Nāṇamoli. (1976). *The path of purification: Visuddhimagga*. Berkeley: Shambhala Publications.
- Chambers, R., Gullone, E., & Allen, N. B. (2009). Mindful emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*, 560–572.
- Coseru, C. (2012). *Perceiving reality: Consciousness, intentionality, and cognition in Buddhist philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- DiValerio, D. M. (2011). *Subversive sainthood and tantric fundamentalism: An historical study of Tibet's holy madmen (Doctoral Dissertation)*. United States: University of Virginia.
- Dreyfus, G. (1997). *Recognizing reality: Dharmakīrti's philosophy and its Tibetan interpretations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dreyfus, G. (2011). Is mindfulness present-centered and non-judgmental? A discussion of the cognitive dimensions of mindfulness. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*, 41–54.
- Dunne, J. D. (2004). *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's philosophy*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Dunne, J. D. (2011a). Key features of Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory. In M. Siderits, T. Tillemans, & A. Chakrabarti (Eds.), *Apoha: Buddhist nominalism and human cognition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dunne, J. D. (2011b). Toward an understanding of non-dual mindfulness. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*, 71–88. doi:10.1080/14639947.2011.564820.
- Dunne, J. D. (2012). Resources for the study of *svasaṃvitti* in ultimate contexts. Presented at the National Meeting of the American Academy of Religion.
- Gethin, R. (2015). Mindfulness: Buddhist conceptualizations. In K. W. Brown, J. D. Creswell, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness: Theory and research*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Gethin, R. (1998). *The foundations of Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, R. (2011). On some definitions of mindfulness. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*, 263–279.
- Gold, J. (2014). *Paving the great way: Vasubandhu's unifying Buddhist philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Goldstein, J. (2002). *One dharma: The emerging Western Buddhism*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Gzón nu rgyal mchog & Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan. (2006). *Mind training: The great collection* (Thupten Jinpa, trans.). Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Harvey, P. (1990). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayes, S. (2003). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change* (Paperbackth ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Higgins, D. (2008). On the development of the non-mentation (*amanasikāra*) doctrine in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, 29*(2), 255–303.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2011). Some reflections on the origins of MBSR, skillful means, and the trouble with maps. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*, 281–306.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (Revised and updated ed.). New York: Bantam Books.
- Karma Dbang Phyug Rdo Rje. (2006). *Phyag chen rgyas pa nges don rgya mtsho, 'bring pa ma rig mun sel, bsdus pa chos sku mdzab tshugs bcas so: Lhan cig skyes sbyor gyi zab khrid nges don rgya mtsho'i snying po phrin las 'od*. Varanasi, India: Vajra Vidhya Institute Library.
- Kim, H.-J. (2007). *Dōgen on meditation and thinking: A reflection on his view of Zen*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lusthaus, D. (2002). *Buddhist phenomenology: A philosophical investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun*. New York: Routledge-Curzon.
- Mathes, K.-D. (2008). *Maitrīpa's Amansikārādhāra* ("A justification of becoming mentally disengaged") (pp. 3–30). XIII: Journal of the Nepal Research Centre.
- McMahan, D. (2008). *The making of Buddhist modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McRae, J. R. (2003). *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, transformation, and genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Papies, E. K., Barsalou, L. W., & Custers, R. (2012). Mindful attention prevents mindless impulses. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 3*, 291–299.
- Rapgay, L., & Bystrisky, A. (2009). Classical mindfulness: An introduction to its theory and practice for clinical application. In W. C. Bushell, E. L. Olivo, & N. D. Theise (Eds.), *Longevity, regeneration, and optimal health: Integrating Eastern and Western perspectives* (pp. 148–162). New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Safran, J., & Segal, Z. V. (1990). *Interpersonal process in cognitive therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Śāntideva. (2008). *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (K. Crosby & A. Skilton, trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., & Teasdale, J. D. (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach to preventing relapse*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E., Astin, J. A., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 62*, 373–386.
- Sharf, R. H. (1995). Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience. *Numen, 42*(3), 228–283.
- Sharf, R. (2014). Mindfulness and mindlessness in early chan. *Philosophy East and West, 64*(4), 933–964.
- Sna tshogs rang grol, & Kunsang, E. P. (2009). *Heart lamp: Lamp of Mahamudra and the heart of the matter*. Boudhanath: Rangjung Yeshe Publications.
- Suddendorf, T., & Corballis, M. C. (2007). Mental time travel across the disciplines: The future looks bright. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 30*, 335–345.
- Suzuki, S. (2006). *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. Shambhala.
- Tsong kha pa. (2002). *The great treatise on the stages of the path to enlightenment* (Vol. 3). Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Tweed, T. A. (1992). *The American encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian culture and the limits of dissent*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Van Schaik, S. (2004). *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and gradual approaches to Dzogchen practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingtig*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Vasubandhu. (2012). *Abhidharmakosa-Bhasya of Vasubandhu: The treasury of the abhidharma and its (auto) commentary* (L. de La Vallée Poussin & Lodrö Sangpo, trans.). New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd.
- Wallace, B. (2006). *The attention revolution: Unlocking the power of the focused mind*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Wallis, G. (2003). *Advayavajra on ādikarma* (pp. 203–230). Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies.
- Žižek, S. (2001). *On belief*. New York: Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2012, August 10). The Buddhist ethic and the spirit of global capitalism. Retrieved from <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-buddhist-ethic-and-the-spirit-of-global-capitalism/>