**How Mindfulness Becomes Mindlessness – a Hermeneutical Approach**

**Abstract**

Over the last several decades the practice of mindfulness has grown to become one of the most widespread applications in the West, so much so that it now rivals words such as yoga and meditation in terms of public recognition. The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly it intends to shed light on mindfulness as a concept and practice that is rooted in Theravada Buddhism. As understood in terms of Buddhism’s ontological soteriology, mindfulness (*sati*) involves the practice of “right meditation” (*samma sati*) as a means of realizing one’s true nature, escaping the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) and attaining the ultimate goal of *nirvana* through wisdom (*pann*a) and the ethics of the eightfold path (*magga*). Secondly, this paper aims to highlight mindfulness as a popular form of intervention and therapy among health care professionals and private therapists in the West. It is fairly well accepted that mindfulness techniques such as MBSR, MBCT, DBT and ACT have been beneficial in terms of treating various illnesses. Unfortunately, in the process of transforming mindfulness (or *sati*)from a Buddhist soteriological to a postmodern Western ontology, the practice has lost a bit of its true soul. The paradox of mindfulness in the West is that while on the one hand, its various modern formations have been effective when it comes to the treatment of illness, on the other; it has been commercialized as a form of quick-fix healing by certain therapists and instructors. This East-West paradox will be analyzed herein in terms of a hermeneutical approach.

Keyword Mindfulness; Mindlessness; Hermeneutic; Buddhism; Mindfulness-Based Intervention

**Introduction**

Over the last several decades the practice of mindfulness has grown to become one of the most widespread applications in the West, so much so that it now rivals words such as yoga and meditation in terms of public recognition. This notwithstanding, the Western practice of mindfulness in the twentieth century is worlds apart from the classical forms of mindfulness (or *sati*) found in Eastern Buddhism. The aim of this paper is to highlight the soteriological nature of mindfulness in its original Buddhist dress and to contrast this with both the positive and negative effects of its evolution as a Western therapeutic practice. One of the problems embedded in the Western approach to mindfulness concerns the West’s general attitude towards all forms of spirituality. Although in its original sense of *sati*, mindfulness contains a clear spiritual dimension, to fit within a Western framework it has had to be refashioned (or repackaged) so as to conform to the requirements of a modern secular society. Thus, the historic practice of *sati* has been transformed from a method for defusing our ego, our sufferings and our attachments and awakening our sympathy and compassion for others (Chappell, 2003:264) to a therapy for psychological self-improvement and the treatment of illness. From the hermeneutical point of view, this conceptual and intentional dichotomy between Eastern and Western approaches to mindfulness calls for both interpretation and explanation within a discourse of religious change (Gilhus, In: Stausberg & Engler, 2011).

Following along these lines, the discourse of this paper divides into the following sections: 1) a discussion concerning the hermeneutical approach; 2) a brief examination of mindfulness (or *sati*) in terms of its historical background as an Eastern Buddhist practice; 3) some remarks concerning the manner in which the Western market has refashioned mindfulness into a popularized technique for intervention and therapy; and, 4) a concluding discussion concerning what the Western approach to mindfulness might learn from that of the East.

**Mindfulness and the Hermeneutical Circle**

The science of hermeneutics traces back to Europe’s 14th century Renaissance scholars of theology and law. Both disciplines emphasize the importance of textual interpretation as a means of mastering different disciplines of knowledge. The primary element in the hermeneutical hub is the original text, which is necessarily seen through the eyes of the beholder. It is this relation or dialectical interplay between the interpreter and the text that is known as the hermeneutical circle. As noted by Gilhus, hermeneutics generally consists of: “a reading that moves back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text, between its structure and meaning, between the reader’s horizon and the horizon of the text, and between the text and context” (Gilhus in: Stausberg & Engler, 2011:275).

Among the significant names in the modern history of hermeneutics are Friedrich Schliermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans George Gadamer (1900-2002) and Paul Ricour (1913-2005). Let us see how these scholars approach the interpretation of texts.

Widely considered the “father” of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher conceived of textual interpretation as the interplay between the understanding of words, sentences, paragraphs and the text as a whole. For Schliermacher there is a never-ending interaction between the interpreter and the text, with the goal being to grasp the author’s original intent. In contrast to Schliermacher, and in opposition to the science of rationality during the nineteen century, Wilhelm Dilthey viewed hermeneutics as the relation between understanding (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*). According to Dithey, ‘understanding’ (*verstehen*) involves the “geisteswissenshaft” (human science) that places an older text in a contemporary context and explanation (*erklären*) involves the opposite—i.e., going backwards from the contemporary context in an attempt to illuminate past history. Dilthey´s approach was thus to analyze the text from within with the aid of the hermeneutical method.

The German philosopher and phenomenologist Martin Heidegger viewed the interpretation of texts as an existential question. As phenomenological researcher, his aim is to engage with the whole being (*Dasein*) always in midst of the ontic reality. Dasein consists of the distant time outside oneself, but can also consist of the time within oneself (*sein zum tode*). Using the metaphor of train travel, one can decouple time from oneself on the one hand or travel with time for as far the train goes on the other. Heidegger also conceived of time in terms of cyclic and linear dimensions. By cyclic time he means a forward motion that goes backwards and by linear time he means the lifetime that one must fulfill.

Hans George Gadamer, a pupil of Heidegger, returned to a more linguistic interpretation of texts. In his book *Warheit und Methode* (1960) he states that because interpreters of texts are historically and culturally embedded, they invariably view them from within the framework of their own prejudices. This requires the interpreter to more deeply penetrate the text in order to achieve insight into its meaning, but not without inspiration taken from the model of the hermeneutical circle.

According to Gadamer, the hermeneutical circle should be understood as the dialectical interplay between reader and text as well as between text and context. Viewing this in relation to Schleiermacher’s interpretation of the hermeneutical circle, one can say that the reader has moved from the outside to the inside of the circle (Gilhus in: Stausberg & Engler, 2011:275).

Finally there is Paul Ricoeur, who stressed a hermeneutics of suspicion instead, one influenced by the three master of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Here interpretation is viewed as the point of departure for an explanation of either Christianity or religion in general. The hermeneutical circle, according to Ricoeur, is the correlation between explanation and understanding and between understanding and explanation (Gilhus, 2011:275). Let us now leave this brief overview of the modern theoretical and epistemological development of hermeneutics and see how the method practically works.

According to Lindström (Lindström, 1990: 117-121), hermeneutic methodology consists of the following four phases:

1) *The Phase of Enlightenment*. In this stage, the interpreter responds to something in the text that appears fragmental or unconvincing. For example, the concept of *sati* in Eastern Buddhism differs in meaning from the Western interpretation of mindfulness—a subject that will be discussed in the next section of this article.

2) *The Phase of Reconstruction*. Here the interpreter attempts to reconstruct the context of the background material—i.e., that which has been said or stated. Turning once again to the concept of mindfulness, this has developed in the West within the context of modern science, which implies understanding how the field of science has approached the concept. If the interpreter finds a diversity of explanations regarding how the method works (in this case, mindfulness) and/or various types of gaps, she continues to Phase Three.

3) *The Phase of Articulation*. To be able to understand the factors of the first phase and second phase of the background material one has to consolidate these two phases in the phase of articulation. In other word, there is an interaction between these two phases that takes place in the third phase. An important guideline in this third phase is to employ cultural comparisons; the interpreter is also meant to become inspired to look for meanings and intentions that may have been overlooked (Gilhus, 2011: 278).

4). *The Phase of Criticism*. In this phase the interpreter is intended to raise new questions with regard to the text. In the process of interpreting texts it is common to overlooked passages that require interpreting in accordance with the hermeneutical circle. As has been noted by Gilhus (p.278), in order to offer a new reading of a given text one must first master its earlier readings. With specific regard to the phenomenon of *sati*/mindfulness, the aim of criticism is to indicate the limitations of the modern scientific interpretation. However, without first placing the phenomenon in its original historical context, no truly meaningful understanding can be achieved. Let us then proceed to view the way that *sati* (mindfulness) is interpreted within the framework of its original context: Eastern Buddhism.

**The Spiritual Path of Sati in Eastern Buddhism**

*Satipatthana* *Sutta,* interpreted by Bhikkhu Analayo (2010), is an important Eastern source relative to the concept of *sati* (or mindfulness) because it enables us to explore the literal meaning of original Buddhist texts and their doctrinal implications relative to mindfulness.

This approach, however, also has its limitations. Texts, original or not, are produced in a particular social, political and economic context, and thus their interpretation requires an understanding of that context as well as the context in which we find ourselves today (Zadek, 1993: 434).

Writing about classic Asian texts and traditions (*Sattipatthana Sutta)*, Carette and King (2005:121-122) note that they remain fundamentally concerned with transforming one´s perspective on life: “This involves a reorientation away from the concerns of the individual and toward an appreciation of the wider social and cosmic dimensions of our existence. /…/ Much of contemporary literature on spirituality rather than picking up the richness and complexity of Asian wisdom tradition privatizes them for a western society than is oriented toward the individual as consumers and society as market (2005:122).” This quotation serves to highlight the transformation of mindfulness from an Eastern soteriological to a Western secular therapeutic marketing context (“pick and mix”, repacking and reselling approaches). Following Carette and King, we can speak of two types of mindfulness: Eastern religio-philosophical mindfulness (or *sati*) and Western medical intervention therapy.

Analayos’ interpretation of *Satipatthana Sutta* begins (*Enlightenment Phase*) by stating that the noun *sati* is related to the verb *sarati* (to remember) (Analayo, 2010:46). Although “*sati”* is related to “remember” in terms of memory, Analayo points out that *sati* is not really defined as memory, but rather as that which facilitates and enables memory (p.47). Analayo writes: “Understanding sati in this way facilitates relating it to the context of satipatthana where it is not concerned with recalling past event, but function as awareness of the present moment”…sati seems to combine both the present moment awareness and remembering what Buddha has taught (p. 47-48).”

According to Analayo,the Eastern understanding of *sati* (mindfulness) also has a variety meanings and purposes. First of all, *samma sati* (right mindfulness)is conceived as a balancing factor set midway between five other faculties (*indriya*): power (*bala*), *confidence (saddha)* and *energy (viriya)*, on the one hand, and *concentration (samadhi)* and (6) *wisdom (panna)* on the other*.* Balancing (or monitoring) is said to have a harmonizing influence on different states of mind and spirit; too much or little of right mindfulness can lead to bodily imbalance (*mindlessness*). Being mindful has a great impact on bodily balance. Sitting and/or walking meditation is the royal road to balancing mind and spirit. From this middle position, *sati* aims to balance and monitor the other faculties and powers by becoming aware of excesses or deficiencies. The idea of *balance* has a long tradition in both Western and Eastern medicine and philosophy.

In the West it goes back to Hippocrates, who developed a dogmatic system of medicine in which health is achieved through the balancing of four bodily liquids: yellow gall (*chole xanthe*), black gall (*chole melaina*), blood (*haima* or *sanguis*) and phlegm (*phlegma*). For instance, melancholia consists of the dominance of black gall in the body. For this, a treatment of diet, herbs and relaxation is prescribed as a means of rebalancing the body’s liquids.

In India during the time of Buddha, the Buddha himself expressed a similar view.[[1]](#footnote-1) *The Great Physician,* as Buddha is sometimes called, prescribed meditation as the royal road to optimal health. With help of insight (*panna*) and meditation one can be free from the three psychic poisons: greed (*lobha*), hatred (*vyapada*) and delusion (*moha*). When the mind is free from greed, hatred and delusion, the liquids in the body are balanced and health (*aroga*) reigns supreme (Ramaswami and Sheik, in: Sheikh & Sheikh, 1989: 104-105).

The second purpose of sati should be regarded as part of the noble eightfold path (*magga*): right view *(samma ditthi),* right thought *(samma sankappa),* right speech *(samma vaca),* right action *(samma kammanta),* right livelihood *(samma ajiva),* right effort *(samma vayama),* right mindfulness *(samma sati)* and right concentration *(samma samadhi)*. Sati in this context plays the role of both a specific path factor and a general mental factor.

The eightfold path is divided into three major parts. The first part consists of concentration (*samadhi*) and the following paths: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The second part, wisdom (*panna*), deals with right understanding and right thought. The third part, ethical conduct *(sila*), consists of right speech, right action and right livelihood (Schmidt, 2011). Within this context, the word “right” assumes an important meaning because it underscores the fact that Buddhist mindfulness is not an ethically neutral practice, but one that requires discriminating between wholesome and unwholesome actions. According to Dhammika (1990), a degree of ethical judgment is necessary to properly practice mindfulness. Thus Analayo interprets *samma sati* as both an aspect of the eightfold path and a general mental factor (2003:57).

By this Analayo means that there is a qualitative distinction between “right” [[2]](#footnote-2) mindfulness (*samma sati*) as a path factor and mindfulness as a general factor, as opposed to doing the “wrong” type of mindfulness (*miccha sati*) (Analayo, 2003:51-52). *Sati,* in the definition of *samma sati,* stands for two mental qualities: diligence (*atapi)* and clear knowing (*sampajana*). It also stands for a state of mind that is free from desires and discontent and directed towards the body, feelings, the mind and the *dhammas,* which becomes the path factor of right mindfulness, according to Analayo.

According to traditional Buddhism the aim of *sati* is to become the master of one´s own mind and to disentangle oneself from the chain reactions that usually invade the mind. Matthieu Ricard writes:“Freedom means that you don´t let that chain reaction occur. As soon as a thought arises, it undoes itself, like a drawing made on the surface of water (Harrington & Zajonc, 2006:159-169).” Without insight (*panna*), right meditation (*samma sati*) and the ethics of the eightfold path (*magga*) the human cannot reach the final goal: freedom from rebirth *(nibbana* or *nirvana*) (Sirander, 1973: 23-24).

Last, *sati* can also be interpreted as the first of seven awakening factors (*bojjhanga*): right mindfulness (*samma sati*), investigation *(dhammavicaya)-of dhammas,* energy *(virya),* joy *(piti),* tranquility *(passaddhi),* concentration *(samadhi) and* equanimit*y (upekka)* (Analayo, 2010*).* The role and purpose of *sati* as an awakening factor is to bring realization (p.51). Certain supportive conditions, such as mindfulness (*sati*) and clear knowledge (*sampajana*) on the one hand, and avoiding un-mindful people and associating with mindful people on the other, help to develop this awakening factor (p.242). These seven enlightenment factors described by Analayo are founded both in the Pali version of the (*Maha) satipatthana* and in the *Sarvastivada* version of the *satipatthana,* according to Kuan (2008:127).

In summary, *sati* in the Eastern context of mindfulness has a variety of meanings and purposes. First, *sati* can be seen as a balancing factor in the middle position of five other faculties. Balancing or monitoring has a harmonizing effect on different states of mind and spirit.

Having either too much or too little of these four faculties leads to bodily imbalance. To be mindful, in other words, has a great impact on bodily balance. Sitting and/or walking meditation is the royal road to balancing mind and spirit. The second aim of *sati* should be regarded as an aspect of the noble eightfold path (*magga*). *Sati,* in this context, plays the role of both a specific path factor and a general mental factor.

Without *samma sati* as path factor one cannot reach realization; at the same time, *samma sati* as general mental factor must be cultivated in the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness (*cattaro satipphatana*): the body (*kayanu*), feeling (*vedana*), states of mind *(citta*) and phenomena (*dhamman*) (Bodhi, 1994).Bodhi quotethe Buddha, who once said that that the four foundations of mindfulness “form the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of Nibbana(Bodhi, 1994).” The last meaning of the word *sati* can be interpreted as the initial cause and foundation of seven awaking factors. The purpose of *sati* in this last context is to promote the arousal of the other awaking factors (Analayo, 2010: 234). Analayo continues: *“*besides providing the foundation for other factors, sati is moreover the one awakening factor whose development is beneficial at any time and on all occasions (p. 235).” It is of great importance to point out that *sati*, as interpreted by Analayo, has different functions in different contexts.

The aim of this brief interpretation of mindfulness from the perspective of Eastern Buddhism is to shed light on this phenomenon within its original context. Without this sort of historical interpretation, the concept of mindfulness cannot be properly understood and appreciated in terms of its root meaning. In contrast to this Eastern perspective on mindfulness, the next section aims to elucidate the Western perspective.

*Positions of sati Role/factor*

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| --- | --- |
| *Sati(middle of five)* | *Balancing factor* |
| *Right mindfulness (samma sati) (next to last of eight)* | *Eightfold path* |
| *Mindfulness (sati) (first of seven)* | *Awakening factor* |

**Mindfulness: Resilience and Peril**

In the Western world, both medical professionals and various types of therapists mostly employ mindfulness as a method of intervention (*the Phase of Reconstruction*). Mindfulness, seen as a self-regulatory tool without a soteriological frame of reference, is used to heal a variety of mental and physical conditions (Didonna, 2009). As a method of Western intervention and therapy, mindfulness displayed much promise during the twentieth century, and that is certainly good (Baer, 2003; Didonna, 2009; Grossman et al 2004). Indeed it has been fairly well established that mindfulness techniques such as MBSR, MBCT, DBT and ACT have been beneficial in terms of treating various forms of illness and stress. In light of this outcome, one can safely say that mindfulness is here to stay and that in the future we will likely witness further advances as a result of research in this field (see, for example, Cullen, 2011).

Unfortunately, once a given form of intervention or therapy has become successful, the tendency is for it to be transformed into a marketplace commodity. The paradox of mindfulness in the West is that while on the one hand, its various modern formations have been effective when it comes to the treatment of illness, on the other, it has been commercialized as a form of quick-fix healing by certain therapists and instructors who are in the business of profiting from others’ sufferings. There is nothing necessarily wrong with a therapist making money from the provision of help so long as he behaves in an ethical manner and teaches the correct application of practices and techniques. However, one wonders whether such an ethical approach can be possible without a deep understanding of the original Buddhist interpretations of mindfulness. This problem is certainly worthy of further elucidation. It is also important to note the growing Western interest in mindfulness and mindfulenss-based forms of intervention (MBI:s), especially over the last decade (Cullen, 2011). This alone should call for a more tightened and formalized type of education. Take, for instance, the different levels of experience possessed by mindfulness instructors. Some have participated in no more than a weekend mindfulness course, whereas others have undergone several years of intensive meditational training under the tutelage of masters (McCown, 2010: 3). There is also a difference in being a teacher/instructor in the West. The Swedish researcher Marie Åsberg refers to an incident in which Karolinska Institute health care students were offered mindfulness training (MBSR) but chose not to participate because they had no time—an answer possibly indicating that they were either overworked or lacking in interest (hard to say) (Åsberg, 2006).

This notwithstanding, a third problem is related to how stressed people assess their options. To continue participation in activities such as MBSR, which call for lengthier participation, is a tough choice for those that are already stressed. Thus, at least in Sweden, many mindfulness educators choose to create lighter version of their original training programs, particular when it comes to MBSR. For example, instead of providing an eight-week program with a one-day retreat, they provide a 5 to 6 week program without any retreat. Some educators even skip walking and/or sitting meditation altogether. From this follows not only a difference in ideas and pedagogy with regard to mindfulness training, but also a reinterpretation of mindfulness itself. By this I mean that mindfulness has already undergone a reinterpretation in its movement from Eastern *sati* to various forms of Western mindfulness therapy. Developing lighter versions of mindfulness out of forms that have already undergone reinterpretation merely amounts to yet a further layer of interpretation. Above all these considerations, one must also choose between various mindfulness programs now being offered on the market. One can see that it could become quite easy to drown in plethora of quick-fix philosophies, although if people’s lives are factually being improved even by pursuing one or the other of these lighter versions, why bother.

At the very least, this current turn of events calls for further reflection, and in the last section my attempt will be to highlight what we might learn from original Eastern Buddhist context that is worth cultivating.

**Teachings from the East**

The teachings of Buddhism provide us with a contrasting picture (*the Phase of Articulation*). The Buddhist way of practice mindfulness can be understood as an act of solidarity, sharing and wisdom (*sila-samadhi-panna*). In this context, one has to understand mindfulness as broader phenomenon that has an impact on society and how to handle our common resources. In an act of social activism, mindfulness plays an important role not only as a healer of individual sickness, but as a network builder that shares material and spiritual resources in a movement of national transformation (Chappell in: Dockett, 2003; Watts & Loy, 2002:101).

Take, for example, world sports such as soccer, ice hockey, basketball, tennis and swimming, which have a great impact on peoples’ lives. People generally like to follow their favorite teams and/or players/athletes.

These great teams and athletes influence human action in various ways. Imagine what great individual, national and international transformation could result if mindfulness was able to capture bit of that worldwide interest. In view of the fact that many of today’s people in both Western and Eastern societies live highly stressful and demanding lives, mindfulness can make a difference as a method of stress management. New technologies such as social networking, cell phones and text messaging create an information overload that places great demands and responsibilities on the “multitasking” mind. There are much “doing” and far less “being”. But if the “doing mode” dominates the “being mode” there will be a difference between how things are and how we wish them to be. This triggers negative emotions such as dissatisfaction, which subsequently sets in motion certain habitual patterns (Allen and Knight, 2005:246).

Mindfulness training, as therapy or interventive technique *brings awareness* to the body and enables “being” over “doing” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004: 96-97). One of several positive outcomes of mindfulness training involves the release of stress (Baer, 2003; Didonna, 2010; Grossman et al 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). In light of that fact, mindfulness is an important tool for use as a coping strategy to handle stress in daily life (Schmidt, 2011). Less stressed people have greater opportunity to bring awareness to the present moment.

Calming down the stress systems of SAM[[3]](#footnote-3) (*sympathetic adrenal medullary system*) and HPA (*hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis*) leads to a feeling of reduced time pressure, better and more effective breathing and a body that brings awareness moment by moment. One becomes literally awake. By practicing mindfulness, one receives valuable tools that teach us to notice our thoughts, feelings and behavior (Barnhofer & Crane, 2010). [[4]](#footnote-4) One learns to take care of the body and mind by becoming more aware of what is happening right here and now—*in this present moment*.

By becoming more present in the moment and obtaining greater access to the consciousness and senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell), we can act rather than react to the things happening around us. Viewing mindfulness through such a lens can facilitate our understanding of mindfulness as a basic human capacity rather than a mere therapeutic practice (Warren Brown & Cordon, 2010).

However, there will always be health care professionals and therapists on the market that offer the consumer “quick fix healing” from illness or healing through “help-self” books, as does the New Age front figure and businessman Deepak Chopra. In contrast to the egoless ontology of Buddhism, Chopra emphasizes the importance of cultivating the self and individualizing responsibility (Carrette & King, 2005:101).

However, much of the religious thoughts that have historically originated in the East are not so easily transplanted in the West. But even though we Westerners are not always able to fully adopt all of Buddhism’s religious doctrines, we should at least reflect upon our approach to Buddhism’s mental legacies. If not, we risk becoming consumers of an “Asian Spirituality” that reflects a distinctive Western obsession with individuality as well as a distinctive lack of interest in compassion, as Carrette and King note (Carrette & King, 2005:114). The Dalia Lama ones said: “I consider that compassion is the base, the sovereign support of humanity” (quoted from Rinpoche and Mullen, in Gilbert, 2005: 218). Buddhism challenges both the individual and society by highlighting certain essential life values that are all too easily laid aside: Right Thought (*samma sankappa*), Right Action (*samma kammanta*) and Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*) (Zadek, 1993:442).

When mindfulness (*sati*) transforms from the soteriological context of Theravadan Buddhism to a postmodern therapeutic context it risks losing its true/authentic spirituality (*The Phase of Criticism*). The Sangha become the market and devout laymen and Buddhist practitioners become consumers.[[5]](#footnote-5) To meditate on Buddhism as the “royal road” to enlightenment and to be free from suffering and rebirth brings new meaning into secular societies like the West. Engler (1986) quotes an Asian teacher of Vipassana who once said: “Many Western students do not meditate. They do therapy. They do not go deep with mindfulness (Engler in: Wilber, 1986:29).”

Western practitioners of mindfulness meditate and perform yoga exercises not only as a form of therapy, but also to cure their illnesses. Training mindfulness also becomes a way of improving their self-image, life-skills and health (Practicing the Negative and Positive Loops of Self-regulation: Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999). But as Westerners, it is also likely that in the process of mindfulness training we tend to mix up *content* and *process* (Aronson, 2004; Engler in: Wilber, 1986).

Therapists using mindfulness as a method tend to orient their clients towards the content of the mind rather than its processes, as Aronson stresses (Aronson, 2004: 42).[[6]](#footnote-6) We become stuck in psychological self-reflection rather than a progression designed to free us from all thoughts and feelings that disturb the mind. Aronson write: “Beginners often take their awareness of their distraction as a sign that they are overwhelmed by thoughts, but it is actually a sign that they are less absorbed in their thoughts and more capable of observing them” (Aronson, 2004:50).

In the East, mindfulness means having the ability to focus on current objects, remember them and not loses sight of them through distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away or rejection. In Western thought, however, mindfulness means to pay more attention to external events and to the content of mind, which includes things such as past associations, concepts, reifications and semblances of sensed object, according to the interpretation of Weick and Putnam (Weick & Putnam, 2012: 276).

Another phenomenon that has influenced Western society over the last ten years is the growing interest in positive psychology. Positive psychology generally teaches people to be more optimistic and happy in life. If you belong to that group of people that are not so happy in life, look for a coach to advise you that a bank loan will make you happy. You may also be told that an unhappy or pessimistic lifestyle can lead to sickness and/or an early death. Whether you will be happy and successful in life, or the opposite, is a matter of attitude, and has nothing to do with external circumstances (for a critical analysis of positive psychology see: Ehrenreich, 2010).

This kind of individualism, which has a special affinity for our therapeutic culture, assumes that all people have a unique core of thought and feeling that they are entitled to express. People in general want to fashion their life in the manner that they wish and develop beliefs in the way that they want. If one combines this emphasis on individualization with markets that are influenced by neoliberalism (i.e., open markets, free trade, privatization), the opportunities may seem endless, but are nonetheless devastating in the long run; demand leads to consumption, which leads to satisfaction (Payutto, 2002: 78). Our constant consuming, with involves constantly choosing and reevaluating, disconnects us from our inner landscape (who we really are) and strengthens the relativism that ripples through the entirety of our lives. But one can also frame this in terms of a Buddhist perspective as follows: wrong consumption leads to greed (*lobha*), which leads to desperation, delusion (*loha*), disempowerment, despair and more greed (Watts & Loy, 2002: 97). From a Buddhist point of view, satisfaction or happiness (*sukha)* can only be based on the promotion of happiness for all (Edwards, 2002:115). In the landscape of positive psychology and neoliberalism, happiness is all about individual achievement. One should seek for one’s own happiness and success in life—a fairly narcissistic way of presenting the self to the world?

From a Buddhist point of view, one can bear in mind that through mindfulness training we develop solidarity (*sila*), sharing (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*). With these three forces (*sila-samadhi-panna*) we can help others to move the community outwards towards other communities using the same energy of solidarity-sharing and wisdom (*sila-samadhi-panna*) that enables their own smaller community to prosper (Watts & Loy, 2002:100). With inspiration from Eastern spirituality, we in the West can learn from the Eastern interpretation of *sati* to become less greedy and more sharing—and, in the long run, to build a sustainable society for all living creatures.

**Conclusion**

Over the last several decades the practice of mindfulness has grown to become one of the most widespread applications in the West, so much so that it now rivals words such as yoga and meditation in terms of public recognition. This notwithstanding, the Western practice of mindfulness in the twentieth century is worlds apart from the classical forms of mindfulness (or *sati*) found in Eastern Buddhism.

The spiritual path of Buddhism rests upon a soteriological ontology. The first phase of the hermeneutical method deals with the concept of mindfulness and how interpretations of the concept vary among scholars and cultures.

Mindfulness (or, for a Buddhist, *sati*) entails using the right meditational technique (*samma sati*), following the ethics of the eightfold path (*magga*) and, with the help of wisdom (*panna*), coming to realize the true nature of the human being. The final goal is to be enlightened and free from rebirth. In the Western world, mindfulness has become a popular form of intervention and therapy among health care professional and private therapist. We have seen in the marketplace over the last twenty years the development of mindfulness techniques such as MBSR, MBCT, DBT and ACT, which have undoubtedly improved the health of individuals with various forms of illness (Baer, 2003; Didonna, 2009; Grossman et al 2005).

This notwithstanding, it is also undeniable that mindfulness in the West has lost it spiritual soul and become a postmodern activity or therapy in the marketplace. In the Phase of Reconstruction, the interpreter aims to reconstruct the context of the background material that has been said or stated. Interpretations of the concept of mindfulness must be conducted within the context of scientific praxis, implying the need to understand how science approaches the concept of mindfulness. Turning once again to the concept of mindfulness, this has developed in the West within the context of modern science, which implies understanding how the field of science has approached the concept. If the interpreter finds a diversity of explanations regarding how the method works (in this case, mindfulness) and/or various types of gaps, she continues to Phase Three. To be able to understand the factors of the first phase and second phase of the background material one has to consolidate them in the third phase of articulation. In other words, there is an interaction between these two phases that take places in the third phase. An important guideline in this third phase is to employ cultural comparisons; the interpreter is also meant to become inspired to look for meanings and intentions that may have been overlooked (Gilhus, 2011: 278). In Phase Four, the phase of criticism, the interpreter is intended to raise new questions with regard to the text. In the process of interpreting texts it is common to overlooked passages that require interpreting in accordance with the hermeneutical circle. With specific regard to the phenomenon of *sati*/mindfulness, the aim of criticism is to indicate the limitations of the modern scientific interpretation. However, without first placing the phenomenon in its original historical context, no truly meaningful understanding can be achieved.

Finally, it must be remembered that practicing mindfulness is an act of solidarity, sharing and wisdom (*sila-samadhi-panna*). In the realm of social activism, mindfulness plays an important role as a network builder that shares material and spiritual resources in a movement of national transformation (Watts & Loy, 2002:101; Chappell in Dockett, 2003).

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1. Buddha himself realized after practicing both a hedonistic and an ascetic life that the path to enlightenment and liberation from suffering was to be found between the middle of all extremes (Carette & King, 2005:95). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With regard to the term “right”, Chao Ying Shen and Gerald Midgley (2007:172) note: “But what is “right” from a Buddhist perspective is locally determined. It can depend on whether people´s intentions are interpreted as “good” or “bad”, and these interpretations involve local assessment that may change from culture to culture, time to time, or context to context. Thus “right” in the eightfold path is not absolute but needs interpretations.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The SAM system is under the regulatory influence of the sympathetic nervous system as well as the adrenal medulla. Understanding the workings of the adrenal glands is vital for those that are endeavoring to understand the physiology of stress response—i.e., both the SAM and HPA stress response systems (Jones & Bright, 2001: 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In their article, Thorsten Barnhofer and Catherine Crane (2011) argue from a perspective influenced by cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT). Their contribution to mindfulness as an intervention and therapy method is therefore based on Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to sociologist Grace Davies, Europeans differ from Americans. Europeans do not approach religion as consumers. Even though she sees some evidence that this is about to change, people have come to see religion more in terms of answers to their needs than an obligation. Europeans attitudes still differ from those of Americans (Morberg, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Weick and Putnam have similarly noted that: “In Eastern thought, to be where you are with all your mind means to pay more attention to internal process of mind rather than to the contents of mind. Eastern mindfulness means having the ability to hang on to current objects; remember them; and not lose sight of them trough distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away, or rejection” (Weick & Putnam, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)