

How Mindfulness Becomes Mindlessness – A Hermeneutical Approach

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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 (panna) 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*

1. 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 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 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 a 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.

2. 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 Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans George Gadamer (1900-2002) and Paul Ricoeur (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 Schleiermacher 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 Schleiermacher, and in opposition to the 19th century science of rationality, Wilhelm Dilthey viewed hermeneutics as the relation between understanding (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*). According to Dilthey, whereas “understanding” involves placing an older text into a contemporary context, “explanation” involves 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 matter. In his view, the aim of the phenomenological researcher 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 can go, on the other. Heidegger also conceived of time in terms of cyclic and linear dimensions. By cyclic time he meant a forward motion that goes backwards and by linear time he meant 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 these objects of study from within the framework of their own prejudices. This deficiency 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 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 and second phase of the background material, one has to consolidate these two phases in the phase of articulation. In other words, 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 overlook 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: Buddhism.

3. THE SPIRITUAL PATH OF SATI IN BUDDHISM

Satipatthana Sutta, interpreted by Bhikkhu Analayo (2003), is an important Eastern source relative to the concept of *sati* 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. All texts 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*), Carrette 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 (i.e., "pick and mix", repacking and reselling approaches). Following Carrette and King, we can speak of two types of mindfulness: Eastern religio-philosophical mindfulness (or *sati*) and Western medical intervention therapy.

Analayo's interpretation of *Satipatthana Sutta* begins (*Enlightenment Phase*) by stating that the noun *sati* is related to the verb *sarati* (to remember) (Analayo, 2003:46). 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 rather functions as awareness of the present moment"...*sati* seems to combine both present moment awareness and remembering what Buddha taught (p. 47-48)."

According to Analayo, the Eastern understanding of *sati* also has a variety of meanings and purposes. First of all, *samma sati* (right mindfulness) is conceived as a balancing factor set midway between four other faculties (*indriya*)/powers (*bala*): confidence (*saddha*) and energy (*viriya*), on the one hand, and concentration (*samadhi*) and 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*). Melancholia, for example, 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 *The Great Physician*, as Buddha is sometimes called, prescribed meditation as the royal road to optimal health. With the help of insight (*panna*) and meditation one can be free from the three psychic poisons: greed (*lobha*), hatred (*vyapada*) and delusion (*moha*). When

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 (Carrette & King, 2005:95).

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 (*samma vayama*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*) and right concentration (*samma samadhi*). The second part, wisdom (*panna*), deals with right understanding (*samma ditthi*) and right thought (*samma sankappa*). The third part, ethical conduct (*sila*), consists of right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*) and right livelihood (*samma ajiva*) (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 rather 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 performing “right”² mindfulness (*samma sati*) as a path and/or general factor on the one hand and performing “wrong” mindfulness (*miccha sati*) on the other (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 desire 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).

Lastly, *sati* can also be interpreted as the first of seven awakening factors (*bojjhanga*): right mindfulness (*samma sati*), investigation-of-dhammas (*dhammavicaya*), energy (*viriya*), joy (*piti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samadhi*) and equanimity (*upekka*) (Analayo, 2003). 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 strictly associating only with mindful people on the other, help to develop this awakening factor (p.242). These seven enlightenment factors 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 four 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 a path factor one cannot reach realization; at the same time, *samma sati* as a 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 quotes the Buddha, who once said 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 awakening factors. The purpose of *sati* in this last context is to promote the arousal of the other awakening 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.

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.”

The aim of this brief interpretation of mindfulness from the perspective of 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.

<i>Positions of sati</i>	<i>Role/factor</i>
<i>Sati(in middle of five)</i>	<i>Balancing factor</i>
<i>Right mindfulness (samma sati) (next to last of eight)</i>	<i>Eightfold path</i>
<i>Mindfulness (sati) (first of seven)</i>	<i>Awakening factor</i>

Figure 1: The Position and Role of Sati in Buddhism

4. 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.

This is not to say that there is something inherently wrong with a therapist making money from the provision of help; this notwithstanding, the onus is on the therapist to behave in an ethical manner and teach the correct application of practices and techniques. One wonders, however, whether such an ethical approach is factually possible without having a deep understanding of the original Buddhist interpretations of mindfulness. This problem is, at the least, worthy of further examination.

It is also important to note the growing Western interest in mindfulness and mindfulness-based forms of intervention (MBI:s), especially over the last decade (Cullen, 2011). This alone should call for a more systematic and established course of education as well as a more formalized set of professional standards. Take, for instance, the different levels of experience possessed by mindfulness instructors. Some have participated in no more than a weekend course of mindfulness training, whereas others have undergone several years of intensive meditational training under the tutelage of masters (McCown, 2010: 3). There are also differences involved 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 (Åsberg, 2006).

In addition to these considerations, a third problem relates to the manner in which stressed people assess their options. To choose to continue their participation in activities such as MBSR, which call for a longer commitment, is often difficult for those that are already stressed. Thus, at least in Sweden, many mindfulness educators choose to create lighter versions 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 with no retreat at all. Some educators even forego walking meditation and/or yoga altogether. From this follow not only ideological and pedagogical differences in 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 another layer of watered-down interpretation. Apart from this sort of problem, one must also choose between the various mindfulness programs that are now being offered on the market, to the point where the seeker of help could almost drown in the plethora of currently available quick-fix philosophies and techniques. Of course, it could be argued that if these lighter versions are factually helping people to improve their lives, why bother with their original context? At

the very least, however, this contemporary turn of events certainly calls for thoughtful reflection. Thus in the final section of this paper I will attempt to highlight some of the things that might be learned and cultivated from mindfulness's original Buddhist context.

5. TEACHINGS FROM THE EAST

The teachings of Buddhism provide us with a contrasting picture (*the Phase of Articulation*). The Buddhist approach to mindfulness can be more broadly understood as an act of solidarity, sharing and wisdom (*сила-самадхи-панна*). In this context, one understands mindfulness as phenomenon that can have a broad impact on society at large as well as on the manner in which we handle our common resources. In the realm of social activism, mindfulness can play an important role not only in terms of healing individual illness, but also as a network builder that lends material and spiritual resources to the aim of positive national transformation (Chappell in: Dockett, 2003; Watts & Loy, 2002:101).

To better understand this point, one can think of world sports such as soccer, ice hockey, basketball, tennis and swimming, whose prominent figures often have a great deal of impact on the lives of those that admire and emulate them. Imagine how much individual, national and international benefit would ensue should mindfulness capture a similar (or even a small) amount of such broad societal interest. Given the fact that many persons in both Western and Eastern societies live highly stressful and demanding lives, and that new technologies such as social networking, blogging and tweeting only serve to exacerbate the situation, the teachings and practices of mindfulness can make a huge difference in terms of helping individuals to manage such stress.

In the modern world there is far more “doing” than there is “being”. The problem is that the more the “doing mode” comes to dominate the “being mode”, the more the gap tends to widen between how things are and how we wish them to be, triggering negative emotions like depression and dissatisfaction that subsequently set in motion certain negative patterns of action (Allen and Knight, 2005:246).

Mindfulness training, as therapy or interventive technique, *brings awareness* to the body, and activates the “being” as opposed to the “doing” mode (Kabat-Zinn, 2004: 96-97). As such, one of mindfulness training's important positive outcomes involves the release of stress (Baer, 2003; Didonna, 2010; Grossman et al 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

In light of this fact, mindfulness can be seen as an important tool for use as a coping strategy relative to the handling of 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 SAM³ (*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 One learns to take care of the body and mind by becoming more aware of what is happening 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 tool (Warren Brown & Cordon, 2009). On the other hand, there will always be health care professionals and therapists on the market that offer the consumer “quick fix healing” through therapies and “help-self” books, as does the leading New Age 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).

While it may be true that much of the thought that has originated from the East cannot be easily transplanted in the West and that Westerners are generally incapable of adopting all of Buddhism's spiritual doctrines, we should at least reflect upon Buddhism's legacy and how we might employ it to our advantage. If not, we risk becoming consumers of a brand of so-called “Asian Spirituality” that largely reflects our own distinctive Western obsession with individuality and lack of interest in compassion, as Carrette and King note (Carrette & King, 2005:114). The Dalia Lama once 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

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).

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).

too easily laid aside: Right Thought (*samma sankappa*), Right Action (*samma kammanta*) and Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*) (Zadek, 1993:442).

Largely stripped of their Theravada Buddhist soteriological context, Western brands of postmodern therapeutic mindfulness have lost much of the authentic spirituality that had been embedded in the original system (*The Phase of Criticism*). As an outcome, the *Sangha* has largely become *the market* and devout practitioners have largely become *consumers*.⁵ To recalibrate our current Western conception of mindfulness training to include the original Buddhist aims of enlightenment and freedom from suffering and rebirth could potentially bring 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).” In other words, Western mindfulness practitioners largely meditate and perform yoga as a means of curing physical illness and/or improving their self-image, wellbeing, life-skills and overall health (Practicing the Negative and Positive Loops of Self-regulation: Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999). But it is also likely that, in the process, such Western practitioners tend to confuse *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 notes (Aronson, 2004: 42).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 writes: “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 acquiring the ability to focus upon, remember and not lose sight of current objects due to distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away and/or rejection. In contrast, according to Weick and Putnam (2012: 276), Western mindfulness encourages the practitioner to pay greater attention to external events as well as the content of the mind, which includes such things as past associations, concepts, reifications and semblances of sensed objects.

Another feature of Western society that has become increasingly prominent over the last ten years is its growing fascination with positive psychology, which emphasizes individual optimism, happiness, personal achievement and material success. In this regard, however, it would appear that a dissatisfied population is to some degree misled when “coaches” imply that things such as securing a bank loan will make people happy or that a pessimistic (what some might call realistic) view of the world can lead to sickness and/or early death. Nor does it seem helpful to most people to inform them that happiness and success entirely hinge upon their attitude and have nothing to do with external forces, circumstances and/or good fortune (for a critical analysis of positive psychology see: Ehrenreich, 2010).

This sort of individualism, which is especially admired in our therapeutic culture, assumes that all persons have a unique core of thought, feeling and inner potential that they are meant to unlock and express. Such a view is, of course, quite appealing to most people, who desire to live and think according to their own lights. If one combines this emphasis on individualism with markets that are influenced by neoliberalism (i.e., open markets, free trade, privatization), the opportunities can appear limitless at first blush, but can also have devastating consequences somewhere down the road (Payutto, 2002: 78). Our constant consuming, which involves constantly choosing and reevaluating, tends to disconnect us from our inner landscape (who we really are) and strengthens the relativism that ripples through the entirety of our lives. The problem can be framed in terms of a Buddhist perspective as well: 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 is encouraged to seek for one’s own happiness and success—a fairly narcissistic way of presenting the self to the world!

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, 2013).

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 through distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away, or rejection” (Weick & Putnam, 2006).

From the Buddhist perspective, mindfulness training is about developing solidarity (*sila*), sharing (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*).⁷ The development of these three attributes (*sila-samadhi-panna*) will enable us to personally prosper as well as to reach out towards other communities by employing the same energy of solidarity, sharing and wisdom (*sila-samadhi-panna*) that has enabled us to thrive (Watts & Loy, 2002:100). With inspiration from the Eastern interpretation of *sati*, we Westerners can learn to become less greedy and more giving, qualities that are critical for the development of a sustainable future for all living creatures.

6. 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 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 Western brands of mindfulness have lost their spiritual dimension and become a postmodern activity or therapy in the marketplace. In the Phase of Reconstruction, the interpreter's attempt is to reconstruct the context of the background material that has been said or stated. In this connection, 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. 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 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 overlook 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 can lend material and spiritual resources to the aim of positive national transformation (Watts & Loy, 2002:101; Chappell in Dockett, 2003).

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⁷ The translations of the concepts *sila* and *samadhi* follow Watts and Loy. These authors define *sila* as "solidarity" and *Samadhi* as "sharing", which can be considered unorthodox definitions as compared to "moral" (*sila*) and "trance" (*Samadhi*), some of the more traditional Sanskrit meanings attributed to these terms. Although unorthodox, these particular translations give a social dimension to the terms that is important within the context of this paper.

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