

MINDFULNESS IN LEADERSHIP: TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper broadly aims to critically analyze the application of mindfulness inherited from Buddhism, as a management tool in contemporary management and leadership studies. This paper will discuss early Buddhist teachings regarding Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya. Specifically, it tries to investigate the concept of mindfulness in its relation to present-centeredness and non-judgmental nature. The methodology employed here is conceptual analysis. The argument in this paper is threefold – Firstly, the paper argues that mindfulness cannot be just present-centered as in Buddhist conception it also means remembering. Secondly, it argues that mindfulness cannot be attributed as non-judgmental as it cannot be free from cognitive mental states. Thirdly, it argues that mindfulness cannot be a non- evaluative as the difference between kuśala and akuśala karmas cannot be ignored.

The paper comprises three parts Part one introduces the concept of mindfulness and mindful leadership. Part two dwells on the literature in psychology vis-à-vis the application of mindfulness as a management tool. The present work will deal with psychologists and organizational theorists who ground their work in Buddhism, especially early Buddhism. Part three elaborates upon how a transfer of bhāva can take place and whether the contours of developmental psychology are sufficient to explain this phenomenal sharing of experience.

Keywords: mindfulness, sati, mindful leadership, bare attention.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has bestowed upon humanity the practice of mindfulness. Various philosophers, therapists and psychiatrists have also taken a keen interest in the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness is often translated as “bare attention”. But in Buddhist philosophy it has broader meaning and usage. The meaning of this term has been part of great debate and discussion. On the one hand, organizational scholars like Dane, Fiol & Connor, Levinthal & Rerup, building

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upon western and psychological studies argue that mindfulness is present-centered awareness; and on the other hand, scholars like Robert Sharf, Bryan Levman and Georges Dreyfus argues that mindfulness incorporates the memory in its meaning so it cannot be just *bare attention* to present awareness.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the examination of widely adopted definition of mindfulness by S. Bishop and the construct of mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn. In the second section, the paper discusses early Buddhist concept of mindfulness as a comparative basis for examining how contemporary definitions of mindfulness in the organizational and psychological literature differ significantly. This section tries to establish contact between the concept of *sati* and the concept of mindfulness from *Satipatthāna Sutta*. In the third section, the role of the development in the field of mindfulness in organizational theories in relation to leadership ethics has been elucidated. In the fourth section, the Buddhist model of mindful leadership and its contemporary relevance has been succinctly put forth.

I

Psychiatrists have made mindfulness practices of Theravada Buddhism as a base for their research work. The understanding of the concept of *mindfulness*, has been brilliantly developed by Georges Davis in his paper, “*Is Mindfulness Present-Centered and Non-Judgmental?*”. These two axes are the main concern of mindfulness practices around the globe.

S. Bishop has given a widely accepted definition of *mindfulness*. He identifies *mindfulness* practice with three criteria, viz. non-elaborative, non-judgmental and present-centered.

Mindfulness forms the central tenet to mindfulness-based interventions. There exist differences over the definition of mindfulness among western scholars and Buddhist scholars. Often it is assumed that nature of the mindfulness according to Western psychologists tend to reflect the Buddhist construct. Western scholars and organizational theorists believe that mindfulness removes suffering and enhances wellbeing. In western psychology literature, the range of mindfulness is influenced by people’s ability to describe themselves, accepting experiences, fostering non-judgmental attitudes and awareness towards the present time. The work of Jon Kabat Zinn in behavioral approaches, work of S Bishop and theorists have described mindfulness as non-elaborative and non-judgmental, present-centered awareness. With the temporal flow of time, every activity or action is acknowledged and accepted. There is no scope of accepting past actions or any conceptualization of past activities. This is different with the concept discussed in various Buddhist texts. One may agree that the reason behind the old idea ought to be reinterpreted and re-established in the light of modern times on modern lines. During Buddha’s time, primary teaching in Buddhism were only two-fold: *Arya Satya* (Noble Truth) and the *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Dependent co-origination). While applying these two teachings of Buddha to the concept of mindfulness, utmost care and concern should be considered so that the main lessons of Buddha’s teaching do not get diluted.

Elaborating the two characteristics of mindfulness which differentiates Western approach with Eastern (Buddhist) method are as follow:

- Non-judgmental nature of mindfulness is our state of awareness which allows observation

of mental states without overidentifying with them to create attitude of acceptance resulting in creation of better understanding. This may also provide a way to disengage from habitual pattern of behavioral responses of individual to difficult instances than to remain a prisoner of one's own habit and compulsion. Their primary concern is habit-forming when they describe mindfulness as non-judgmental.

- The description of present-centered non-evaluative awareness describes a state of mind where an individual focuses on events happening in the present moment. There is no scope of evaluating experiences attached with past and future moments. In a way, the individual mind is merely interested in things occurring in the present moment along with observations of reactions.

Among Buddhist scholars and Western scientists, both independently and together, there is a lack of agreement about the specific definition of mindfulness.

In contrast with Western description of mindfulness, Buddhist definition encompasses practices which settles with past experiences as well as future practices. The work discussed in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* lays the discourse for mindfulness meditative practices to make individual mind to function in different circumstances. Meditative practices ensure elimination of causes of sorrow and sufferings, progress towards spiritual development and substantial changes in emotional traits and cognitive control over the mind. This results in balanced behavioural practices.

II.

Mindfulness is the ability of the mind to retain and bind information on the object without losing the flow of experience. Mindfulness or *Sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*, स्मृति) has been used to describe awareness, attention and remembering. One being mindful is equivalent to being in the state of present. These terms are widely exchanged while discussing the nature and scope of *Sati*. Buddhaghosa gives the definition of *sati* within the context of the classical Theravāda tradition, “they remember (*saranti*), or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering (*sarana*). Thus, it is mindfulness (*sati*). Its characteristic is not wobbling; its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding or the state of being face to face with an object.” (*Ñānamoli Bhikkhu 1976, XIV 141*).¹ The notion of *sati* can be analyzed in contrast to mindfulness being present-centered and non-evaluative awareness in contemporary discourses. *Sati*/mindfulness should be evaluative, cognitive and judgmental in acceptance of activities. It shall describe the ability to retain information. The non-conceptuality of mind being defined as present-centered should not be the defining force of mindfulness. Rather the ability of mind in retaining information and explicitly evaluative, without drifting away from present, the wholesome (*kuśala*) and unwholesome (*akuśala*) mental states should be taken. It is the retentive ability, memory and mindfulness which has significant similar characteristics that tends to construct “process of mindfulness” in sustainable way. For example, while viewing objects one tends to integrate flow of information thus making sense of it and not carried away by the flow of information.

In true sense, *sati* is meaningful and makes sense only when it includes recollection of past as well as present positions. This ability of the mind to retain attention without losing the temporal flow and circumstances has been explained by Buddhaghosa. Retention improves

with top-down ability of mind. The practice of meditation tends to increase the capacity for top-down process to hold information and allows mind to strengthen cognitive control. Such mechanisms tend to integrate information into meaningful patterns and create understanding of intersubjectivity, tolerance and tranquility.

The Buddhist concept of mindfulness and parts of Western organizational theorists followed by psychological literature needs to be constructed in a way which leads to better understanding of the concept of mind and its attributes. The discourse over mindfulness has remained matter of debate for contextualization, embeddedness and psychological development in contrast with Buddhist practices. The Western science does not accept the original form of mindfulness proposed in the Buddhist literature. According to them it fails to bring out fundamental changes in the psychological development of an individual. As an outcome, de-contextualized form of mindfulness is accepted.

Theravada Buddhist literature identifies three forms of mindfulness: *sati*, *appamāda* (ethical code of conduct, Sanskrit: *apramāda*) and *sampajañña* (right spiritual development). Mindfulness as *appamāda* is not much different with *sati*. In fact, it further augments the definition of *sati*. *Appamāda* brings with it sets of ethical conduct within the sphere of activities. This introduces ethical dimension to mindfulness and moves beyond awareness of happening (*sati*).

Western perspective

Ethics is codification of morals designed for recognized work. In the West, the notion of right and wrong involves moral values and ethics. This has created differences as right for one can be wrong for others. There is a struggle for an individual to work out how their action is right and preserves the interests of the others. This does not mean that people are allowed to act immorally. To measure the conventional form of ethical conduct- general rights and universal rights are suggested. In this way the individual can keep generating awareness about one's own actions, keeping his mind updated with sets of event/information happening. Thus, the Western scholars have myopic approach in neglecting ethical code as important force. It's the awareness of ethical consideration that helps the individual to generate mindful activities.

Eastern Perspective

There are several teachings available to describe morals and their code of conduct. Buddha's Eight-fold path (*Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*), ethical framework in *Pañca-sīla* (five precepts) and other characteristics like kindness, compassion are available to codify morals. It is seen that ethical conduct and mindfulness involves self-awareness of own action within moral framework. If *sati* involves merely non-judgmental awareness (i.e. including both past and present experiences), ethics introduces components of judgment in the form of compassion and kindness because an individual is aware about the moral conduct and the worth it creates.

In contrast to the Western approach, ethics in Buddhist literature reflects that ethics not only creates well-being for self but also creates positive mental state. The ethics create awareness about *kamma niyāma* where there is no involvement of super-agency but own self actions. Theravada Buddhist explains that awareness of actions and essence of moral

framework delivers benefits to self and to the others. The dimension added by ethical conduct (*appamāda*) to mindfulness is more than just experiencing actions as happenings (*sati*). The individual firstly judges the series of information and then reflects on actions based on precepts of compassion or kindness. Such intervention of ethics in mindfulness is missing in western discourse.

III.

The main issues addressed in this section are the misconceptions regarding the concept of mindfulness for individual/leader in management literature being-

- a) Consideration of mindfulness as of psychological nature which does not require any sustained meditative training/practice.
- b) Mindfulness in the very first place is just a *bare attention*.
- c) Considering mindfulness to be synonymous with the non-judgmental nature of present moment awareness, which is most of the time related with stress reduction.

Let us examine how these misconceptions have made management and organizational theorists to unknowingly take up the idea of mindfulness as being an ethically neutral conception and performance enhancement technique.

Organizational scholars like Dane (2011), Hede (2010), Hunter & McCormick (2008), Weick & Putnam (2006), have relied on a very selective and puzzling mixture of Buddhist sources, coupled with western ideas taken up from the work of Langer and other clinical psychologists [Brown & Ryan (2003), Langer & Moldoveanu(2000)]. These works are of the same ideology as described by Kabat-Zinn in following ways, "*Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non -judgmentally*".

Although Kabat-Zinn's model of mindfulness is well established in the scientific literature, clinicians and neuroscientists have recently started looking into the idea of mindfulness as described in the 2500-year-old historical models having its origin in the Buddhist tradition.

The most prominent characteristics of mindfulness propagated by the modern world are far distant from Canon's ideology of mindfulness. But mindfulness is a function of past memory, therefore, it cannot be attributed as *bare present- moment* attention. The views of mindfulness in contemporary times are coming to be seen as partial understandings which have understated or have completely left out the role which ethics play. As Dreyfus (2011) so eloquently pointed out, ". . . contemporary authors are in danger of leading to a one-sided understanding of mindfulness as a form of therapeutically helpful spacious quietness".

MINDFULNESS IS NOT REDUCIBLE TO A PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAIT

Dane (2011) argues that the empirical work done by western scholars is giving a convergent and collective understanding of the concept of mindfulness. This is contradicted in recent literature of clinical and contemplative neuroscience, to large differences and disparities in the way mindfulness is conceptualized, operationalized, and practiced [Chiesa(2012), Chiesa & Malinowski(2011), Dorjee(2010), Grossman(2008,2011); Malinowski (2008), S. Stanley(2013)]. Dane's assertion strike as being premature and unfounded. This assertion is liable

for rejection as the empirical data which Dane is following is derived from psychological questionnaires which purpose to measure mindfulness. [Baer(2011),Baer, Samuel, & Lykins(2011), Baer, Smith, & Allen(2004) Brown & Ryan(2003), Lau *et al.*(2006), Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht & Schmidt(2006)]. Till now a minimum of nine different psychometric questionnaires have been studied all of which aim to measure and define mindfulness in a different way (S. Stanley,2013). Additionally, several issues related to construct validity, reliability and self-reporting biases linked with several mindfulness questionnaires, and an implicit assumption that discrete psychological features can be quantified and measured tantamount to mindfulness have been observed (Grossman & Van Dam (2011)). Giving a critical evaluation of empirical approach, Grossman & Van Dam (2011) summarizes:

“A benchmark doesn’t exist which can be used to evaluate questionnaires intending to measure mindfulness. Therefore, we cannot claim to know if a questionnaire is reliable in measuring some aspects of mindfulness. This scenario raises another concern for the explanation which might lose the relationship to the teachings and practices that gave rise to MBCT & MBSR”.

Contrasting to the Dane’s work, a high level of divergence in how mindfulness is, practiced, defined and conceptualized among different questionnaires has been found by Grossman (2008). Western psychological version of mindfulness is thought to be a single and multidimensional attribute in addition to a state-like quality [Chiesa(2012),Lau *et al.*(2006)]. For example, Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) of Brown and Ryan’s (2003) is one of the most widely acceptable scale to measure mindfulness. It is based on the idea that concept of mindfulness is a construct based on “present-centered attention” [Chiesa(2012)]. The main theme behind the MAAS is the idea that mindfulness can be evaluated on the bases of how an individual thinks, –which Dane terms as “mind-wandering”[Dane (2011),Grossman &Van Dam(2011)]. In opposition to this, the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) views Mindfulness as a multifaceted trait. FFMQ is made up of subscales as “describing” which measures how much an individual can convey themselves in words, mitigation of emotions, and self-criticism [Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer and Toney(2006)].

Self-report mindfulness evaluation has a tendency of observable simplistic language, which fails to capture the multidimensional processes of mindfulness. Also it may be comprehended in different ways by different groups of people [Grossman and Van Dam(2011)]. This has led to several questionable observations between non-meditators and experienced meditators. In Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory’s (FMI) evaluation, the score of binge-drinkers was significantly higher on mindfulness as compared to the score of experienced meditators (whereas college students were in the middle). Moreover, no assumption of prior requirement of mindfulness training was taken into consideration as such self-reports are made based on an ordinary state of awareness suspending any requirement of being in an attentive state [Grossman (2011)].

It was accepted by Kabat-Zinn (2013) that mindfulness cannot be gauged by survey-based instruments. A number of scholars has also rejected the current questionnaire of measuring mindfulness as these seem to be distorting and misinterpreting the classical conceptualization of mindfulness as practiced by Buddhists [Chiesa (2012), Grossman(2008),Rapgay &

Bystrisky(2009)]. Critiquing the current trends of research in psychology of mindfulness Grossman and Van Dam (2011) have made a very assertive point which should be taken into consideration.

Thus, the question arises how to measure mindfulness without playing down the original Buddhist practice? Grossman and Van Dam (2011) provides several possibilities of measuring the mindfulness of an individual using in-depth interviews, centering around the measures and particularity of consequence of the practice of mindfulness and the examination and measurement of the psychological and physiological changes that are experienced by an individual after practicing mindfulness. Additionally, initiatives such as Mind & Life Institute’s “Mapping the Mind” project and “The Contemplative Development Mapping Project” at Brown University which are relatively new are attempting to a more comprehensive method to measure the practice of mindfulness. These also critically involve Buddhist textual tradition and experienced Buddhist meditators [Britton, Lindahl, Cahn, Davis and Goldman (2014), Mind and Life Institute (2013)]. These initiatives also take cross-cultural collaboration into consideration. They employ neuroscientists, clinicians and contemplative scholars to develop a new research methodology that will consider first and the third persons approach, to understand the Buddhist practice of mindfulness in a detailed and a complex manner.

IV.

This section deals with the contemporary relevance of mindful leader model from an early Buddhist perspective. First is to make decisions effectively. It is certain that managerial or leadership decisions will be better if these are taken in the state of mindfulness. Teamwork which can also be said as relationship management will be the second area of concern. This will help in better transmission of the vision, motivation and the quality to inspire. This stems from the fact that mindfulness instils emotional stability in a person which in turn leads to effectively finding solutions to disputes at the workplace. Work-life balance is the third area of concern. A person practicing mindfulness is calm and peaceful. These qualities help the person to effectively tackle stress generated during personal life and work. Ecocentric relationships are the fourth area of concern. The interconnectedness between man and nature is better recognized with the help of mindfulness. Hence, it can be stated that a mindful leader brings eccentric fresh organizational ideas which result in sustainable lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

The above diagrammatic representation shows that central concern for Buddhist conception of mindfulness and at other level, organizational and psychological work, differs considerably. It is crucially

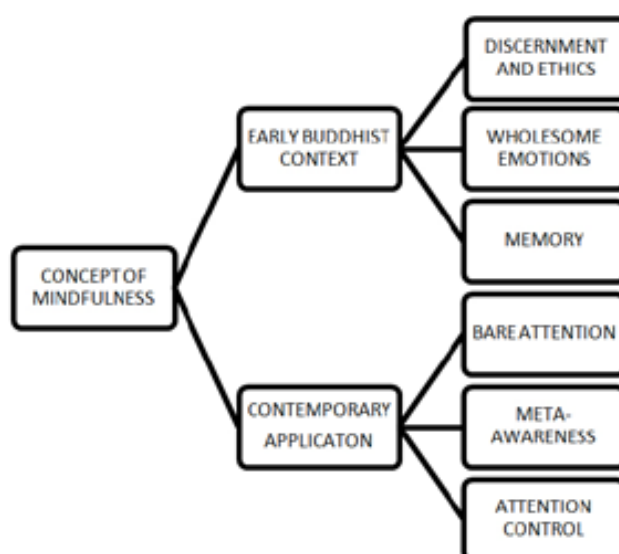


Figure: Concept of Mindfulness

important to understand that the capacity of mindfulness should not be limited to just as a therapeutic technique, but it should be extended to the natural dimension which is an important part of cognitive process. This dimension of mindfulness is not looked upon when it is viewed only from a one-sided aspect of being a non-judgmental present-centered awareness of experience.

We also perceive that equating mindfulness with present-centered non-judgmental awareness understate the cognitive consequences of mindfulness, its capabilities of bonding together the vast array of experiences which may enable one to understand and grasp the very essence of physical and psychological state of body. Relying heavily on the non-judgmental character of mindfulness and placing the main problem in conceptuality, contemporary philosophers are giving a wrong direction to the idea of mindfulness and reducing it to a partially derived view of being only a therapeutically beneficial spacious quietness. It is crucially important to understand that the capacity of mindfulness should not be limited to just as a therapeutic technique, but it should be extended to the natural dimension which is an important part of cognitive process. This dimension of mindfulness is not looked upon when it is viewed only from a one-sided aspect of being a non-judgmental present-centered awareness of experience.

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