

## Relevance of the No-self Theory in Contemporary Mindfulness

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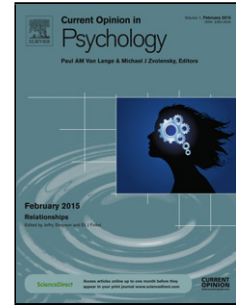
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Relevance of the no-self theory in contemporary mindfulness

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The ideas of mindfulness and no-self are intimately connected in Buddhist philosophy. This is because, in Buddhist Philosophy, the practice of mindfulness leads to the realization that there is no such thing as a self. In contemporary mindfulness research and practice in psychology, the no-self theory has not played such a basic or fundamental role. This is evident from the fact that in numerous contemporary psychological works on mindfulness, the concept on no-self is not even mentioned.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</sup> Further, in some works on mindfulness the self is discussed as if it played a role, even an important role in mindfulness. Thus, Shonin et al. refer to the self and “observing the self” in mindfulness meditation,<sup>6</sup> while Ivatzen et al. refer to “meditation on authentic self” and “future

vision of self' as part of mindfulness training.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in those places where the idea of no-self is mentioned, it is sometimes misunderstood. Austin, for example, explains the transition to the state of no-self by saying, "the once-tall arrogant 'I' of the earlier problem self is transformed...toward that of a more actualized lower-case *I*" and that the "*Me* of the anxious self can become a more buoyant *me*." 11 But, as I shall show, none of this has anything to do with Buddhist concept of no-self. Dor-Ziderman et al. show a better awareness of the nature of no-self and its relation to mindfulness, but then go on to claim, "Mindful awareness induces a sharper sense of the normally perceived subjective sense of self...but treats it as an object of meditation." 12 But this also goes against the Buddhist idea that the experience of no-self dissolves the sense of self.

One account of the differences between the Buddhist and contemporary views of mindfulness is presented by Lindahl. 13 Lindahl argues that the Buddhist concept of "right mindfulness" is different from the contemporary psychological view. This is, he says, because the Buddhist concept is inherently ethical, involving ideas of "right views" and "right effort." Yet as Lindahl himself seems to realize, early Buddhist texts are unclear about the differences between "right mindfulness," "wrong mindfulness" and simply "mindfulness." This is why he is forced to turn to modern commentators who argue for an ethically laden notion of right mindfulness as involving avoiding "unwholesome states of mind." I would argue, however, that the Buddhist concept of mindfulness is only ethical in the sense that its ultimate purpose is to alleviate suffering. And even here, the four noble truths are not an argument for why we *ought* to alleviate suffering. Rather, they are merely prescription for how we *can* alleviate suffering if we so chose. That Buddhist mindfulness is not an inherently ethical concept in several of the Mahayana schools. This is especially evident in the works of Zen thinkers such as Dogen<sup>14</sup> or Bankie, <sup>15</sup> who see ethics as being peripheral to mindfulness. But if it is only ethical in the sense of "alleviating suffering," then it is ethically no different from contemporary mindfulness. For contemporary mindfulness also aims at alleviating suffering.

What mainly distinguishes contemporary mindfulness from its Buddhist roots is not any reliance on a system of practices or an ethical code, but is rather the contemporary tendency to overlook the role of no-self. And this is understandable; for as Lisa Dale Miller says, it is the subject of the self that most divides Buddhist from Western psychology: “Throughout history,” she says,

Western psychology has consistently asserted the primacy of the self and healthy development of the self as a necessity for mental health. Buddhist psychology has no quarrel with healthy development of the mind and heart. In fact, it remains a primary objective of this methodology. However, Buddhist psychology, with its rigorous phenomenological approach, reveals this solid, separate self to be nothing more than an interdependently co-arising stream of shifting phenomena lacking any inherent permanence or solidity. 16

Let us now turn the no-self theory in Buddhist philosophy and its role in mindfulness.

When the Buddha gave his first teaching, he presented what he called the four noble truths. The first truth is that all life is suffering. This is because life is attended by sickness, old age, and death. Thus, life is joined with things unpleasant and even when we do have pleasant experiences, their loss is painful. The second truth is that the cause of this suffering is our self-centered cravings. We go about our lives, says the Buddha, “seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this present life.” 17 The third truth is that the overcoming of suffering depends on the overcoming of these cravings. The fourth truth is that the way to overcome self-centered cravings is to follow the eightfold noble path.

I will discuss this path shortly. First, there is the question of why we have self-centered cravings. The Buddha’s answer is that they arise through the chain of dependent origination. This is

a chain of causally linked mental states. The chain usually starts with ignorance, which gives rise to false thoughts, attachments, cravings, and other mental events, which gives rise to suffering. The purpose of the eightfold path is to stop suffering by removing the first link in the chain, that is, by removing ignorance.

For the Buddha, ignorance here refers foremost to the belief in the existence of a self. This root delusion, as it is called, is the ultimate source of our suffering. 18 19 This is because once I think I have a self, then in the same breath I start to think in terms of what is mine and what is not mine. Following on the heels of these thoughts are attachments to what I see as mine. I become attached to these because I see them as being more important than what is not mine. Thus, my success is more important than your success, my pain is more important than your pain, my children are more important than your children, and so on. This then leads to cravings, both to hold onto what is mine and also to acquire more that I can call mine. Here is the origin of self-centered states like, jealousy, envy, greed, and arrogance. All of this brings suffering with it as I fight a losing battle to protect what is mine in the face of inevitable sickness, ageing, and death.

Why then does the Buddha think that the self is a delusion? Here is where mindfulness comes in. For it is through mindfulness that we come to see the non-existence of the self. Mindfulness is a step in the eightfold noble path. It is, however, a definitive step on the path. This is because it is the first step in the path that explicitly refers to meditation. The first six steps, which comprise wisdom and morality, are often interpreted not as being preliminary steps in the path, but as mental and behavioural features that follow naturally in the wake of achieving the concluding two meditational elements of mindfulness and *samadhi* or concentration, as it is usually translated. Although concentration is given as the final step in the path, it is also intimately connected with of mindfulness.

To see how this works, let us look at mindfulness as it is described in the *Satipatthana Sutta* or “The discourse on the foundations of mindfulness.” Here the Buddha recommends that we observe

the functions of awareness without actively engaging them. Thus, he says of the person practicing mindfulness, “When anger is present, he knows, ‘There is anger in me,’ or when anger is not present, he knows, ‘There is no anger in me.’”<sup>20</sup> In this way, anger loses its control over me. It cannot sweep me away because in mindfulness I distance myself from it by not engaging with it; I simply note its presence or absence.

The difficulty, however, is that other elements of my awareness are competing for my attention, calling out to me, as it were, and so working against my ability to note “There is anger in me.” Concentration is what helps to hold these competing calls at bay. Buddhaghosa, a fifth-century Buddhist philosopher, says that concentration is “the centering of the consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly and rightly on a single object.”<sup>21</sup> This centering enables the practitioner to focus on the single object—for example, the “anger in me”—without being distracted by the other competing objects of awareness, while nevertheless still being aware of them. In this sense, concentration is necessary to achieve fully mindfulness.

Because mindfulness is an observation of the elements of awareness, it has much in common with phenomenology. According to Edmund Husserl, the founder of Western phenomenology, phenomenology is the practice of describing the contents and structure of consciousness as they present themselves to us.<sup>22</sup> This is done while setting aside or bracketing theoretical considerations, considerations that might influence us to overlook or interpolate elements into our description that have no basis in the immediate experience.

It is in the phenomenology of mindfulness that we come to see that there is nothing in our experience that could be called a self. This is because what is presented to us in the state of mindfulness are the thoughts, images, memories, feelings, and sensations that make up awareness, never anything that “has” this awareness or is in some sense the author of awareness. Throughout our daily routines we often simply assume the existence of a self. We assume, for example, that there

*must* be something that is thinking our ideas. Reflecting on this we might try to convince ourselves by saying “ideas just don’t appear by themselves: there *must* a self who thinks them.” But this is a theoretical consideration that has no basis in experience.

Some Western thinkers have also noted this “selfless” feature of awareness. David Hume, a central philosopher of the Enlightenment, states that although many people think they have an awareness of a distinct self, “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat, cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.”<sup>23</sup> His conclusion was that the self is a fiction. I myself argue that what we might think is the self is really just a constructed self-image, that is, a shifting compilation of images, memories, and feelings that are intimately connected to how we think of and evaluate our lives.<sup>24</sup>

A good way to understand how the constructed self-image might be mistaken for a persisting self is to see that it is much like an image on a computer screen. Imagine, for example, that you type the letter “A” at the left-hand side of a document file. Then imagine that you place the cursor to the left of the “A” and hold down the space bar. This will make the “A” appear to move across the screen to the right. But this is not what is happening at all, for there is no one “A” that moves across the screen. Rather, there are numerous “A’s” that are lit up and extinguished in a rapid and chain-like succession across the screen. This gives the convincing illusion that there is one persisting “A” that moves across the screen. That which we take for the self has a similar existence. For just as the apparent “A” that moves across the screen is an image constructed out of numerous and momentary “A” images and has no enduring basis, so is the apparent self that moves through one’s life an image constructed out of numerous and momentary constituent images, memories, and feelings that has no enduring basis.



The fact that we can refer to other people or ourselves by personal names or personal pronouns, does not change this. For this sort of referring is merely a convention of language. Such words need not refer to a metaphysical reality. When I say, “It is cold outside,” the word “it” does not refer to any particular thing. It is merely a way of saying “There is cold outside.” In a similar way, when I say, “I am thinking,” the word “I” does not refer to any particular thing. For it is merely a way of saying “There is thinking.”

But who then is it that thinks thoughts? One might as well ask, “Who or what flows the river?” for just as there is nothing that flows the river, likewise there is nothing who thinks thoughts. And just as the river flows itself, likewise it is thoughts who think themselves.

Here then is the relevance of the no-self theory for contemporary mindfulness. In its original formulation, mindfulness is practiced for the express purpose of the realization of no-self. And when mindfulness is practiced properly, this is its typical result. Moreover, it is this result that frees us from the suffering. As Chan puts it.

Buddhism therefore has indeed a different goal from psychology for ultimate psychological well-being because it aims at the complete dissolution of the old self for reaching the new state of no-self. In psychology, even when internal psychological conflicts are resolved and cognitive errors rectified by either personal growth or psychotherapy, identity with the perceptual self remains. 25

In other words, if contemporary mindfulness is practiced without the goal of removing identification with the constructed self-image, and thus achieving no-self, then ultimate psychological well-being cannot be achieved. If, for example, someone receives a mindfulness-based intervention for the reduction of stress, and this intervention ignores achieving the state of no-self, then although

the person might come away with reduced stress, he or she will more than likely continue to have attachments stemming from his or her sense of self. These attachments are precisely the basis for the self-centeredness that blocks the way to psychological well-being. From the Buddhist perspective, using a mindfulness-based intervention while not helping the individual to achieve the no-self awareness is like tending to an external cut with a patient who is bleeding internally.

It is important to see, however, that it is not merely the achievement of an awareness of no-self that is seen to lead to ultimate psychological well-being. Rather, it is the achievement of this awareness *through* the practice of mindfulness. This is because the awareness of the non-existence of the self without mindfulness can be a frightening experience for one that has not first gained the cognitive skill of non-engagement that is achieved in mindfulness 26

None of this is not to say that mindfulness based interventions do not help to alleviate suffering. Nor is it to say that people working in these areas should not use mindfulness in their own way. It is only to say that by ignoring the no-self experience, they are falling short of achieving what mindfulness was originally employed to achieve.

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