Sati or Mindfulness? Bridging the Divide

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Introduction

Clinically-based interventions using mindfulness in various forms appear to have integrated themselves in a significant manner into Western approaches to mental health care. Whether this is for people with recognized mental health problems, or for those who are simply using mindfulness for the enhancement of well-being, ‘mindfulness’ can no longer be considered esoteric and the preserve of a minority fringe engaged in a ‘religious’ activity. However, this integration has not come without a cost, and that cost has been the mutual suspicion that has arisen among practitioners on both side of the ‘divide.’ The divide mentioned is none other than that which is usually characterized as the clash between empirically-based scientific approaches and ‘religion’, here specifically the Buddhist ‘religion.’ Nonetheless, the suspicion can be seen as mutual. Not only do some engaged with the ‘scientific’ approach often view the Buddhist background as unnecessary, perhaps even irrelevant, those within the Buddhist fraternity have come to characterize mindfulness-based approaches as somehow ‘dharma’ light, something I will return to below.

What is in a Word?

The title of this chapter contrasts and refers to the two words used within what I am labeling the ‘divide.’ ‘Mindfulness’, for many, has now come to represent the most significant term used within what we can refer to as mindfulness-based approaches. However, so ubiquitous has the usage of the term ‘mindfulness’ become that those practicing...
and teaching within Buddhist contexts often attempt either to find another word or coin new phrases to represent what they are engaged in. The other strategy, and the one that I have adopted in this chapter, is to revert to the word *sati*, a term derived from one of the primary textual languages of the Buddhist tradition. In contrasting these two terms, I will attempt to get a better perspective on where some of the suspicion mentioned above might originate from, and to see how much of it is well founded.

**Buddhism and Mindfulness-based Approaches: A Clash of the Ancient and the Modern?**

It is relatively easy to understand how some of the suspicion between the two elements engaged in ‘mindfulness’ is generated. *Prime facie*, it could be seen as arising from the clash between an extremely ancient tradition, viewed as religious and rooted in the Indian subcontinent and other Asian cultures, and a much more modern scientific and evidence-based approach that has its origins in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1980s. Let us examine this claim.

The first part of this chapter will be primarily exegetical, as I feel that it is necessary to examine in some detail the general Buddhist background, and particularly the way *sati* is perceived within the early tradition. I believe that this is necessary as much of the suspicion of the Buddhist underpinnings of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is founded on both a lack of knowledge and a misperception of the teachings of the historical Buddha.

What we term ‘Buddhism’ arose in India in the fifth century BCE and the Buddha, on the evidence provided by recent scholarship (Bechert and Gombrich, 1991), is reckoned to have died around 400 BCE. From its inception, the movement that the Buddha founded was directed towards social and psychological transformation. In many ways, the Buddha can be seen as the first ‘psychologist’ in that any profound change within the individual was to be achieved through penetrating insight into the nature of the mind and how it operated. His quest was to understand what he termed *dukkha*, often translated as ‘suffering’, but probably better rendered as ‘dissatisfaction.’ In the course of understanding the nature of *dukkha* and how it was generated, the individual gained insight into the part the mind played in generating *dukkha*. His aim was to help individuals eliminate their mental contribution to the overall state of personal dissatisfaction. The elimination