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Intimate distances: William James' introspection, Buddhist mindfulness, and experiential inquiry[☆]

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ABSTRACT

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The recent and growing interest in 'mindfulness' and 'mindfulness meditation' across disciplines in the West presents us with a unique opportunity to reconsider whether Buddhism has anything to offer our contemporary psychological investigations. I argue that the Buddhist-inspired practice of mindfulness has potentially profound implications for the ways in which we conduct our investigations as psychologists, and that, as a style of experiential inquiry, it has at least one Western antecedent in the early introspectionist method of William James. Both are practices of becoming aware of experience; and paradoxically becoming intimately distant with our experience. I present a non-dualistic approach in which introspection and mindfulness are seen not only as psychological but also as social practices, operating simultaneously at the boundary of the individual/inner and social/outer, collapsing such distinctions in practice, and radically undermining the distinction between self and other. While there are similarities between James' practice of introspection and mindfulness, there are also differences, and I suggest that they should not be easily conflated. Clarifying their relationship should be helpful, not only in distinguishing them from one another, but also in pointing to how mindfulness might allow a broader application than James' introspection once did.

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1. Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, Anagarika Dharmapala – a Sinhalese Buddhist monk, on a tour of the United States – is said to have attended a lecture by William James at Harvard University. During the lecture, James apparently became aware of the monk, dressed in a distinctive yellow toga, sitting in the audience. "Take my chair," James said, "and I shall sit with my students. You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I am." Dharmapala obliged and gave a short account of Buddhist teachings, after which James turned to his

students and remarked, "This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now" (adapted from Sangharakshita, 1952, p. 78). One hundred years on, it appears James' prediction never came true. It has taken much longer for academics in the mainstream of Western Psychology to begin to share James' open-mindedness towards Buddhist ideas, let alone to treat them as a valid 'Psychology'. But the recent and growing interest in 'mindfulness' and 'mindfulness meditation' across disciplines in the West presents us with a unique opportunity to reconsider whether Buddhism has anything to offer our contemporary psychological investigations.

I argue that the Buddhist-inspired practice of mindfulness has potentially profound implications for the ways in which we conduct our investigations as psychologists, and that, as a style of experiential inquiry, it has at least one

[☆] In tribute to Francisco Varela (see 2001) on the tenth anniversary of his death.

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Western antecedent in the early introspectionist method of William James. Both are practices of becoming aware of experience; and paradoxically becoming intimately distant with our experience. I seek to present a non-dualistic approach in which introspection and mindfulness are seen not only as psychological but also as social practices, operating simultaneously at the boundary of the individual/inner and social/outer, collapsing such distinctions in practice, and radically undermining the distinction between self and other – especially in the case of mindfulness practice.

While there are similarities between James' practice of introspection and mindfulness, there are also differences, and I suggest that they should not be easily conflated. Clarifying their relationship should be helpful, not only in distinguishing them from one another, but also in pointing to how mindfulness might allow a broader application than James' introspection once did.

I will begin with a discussion of definitions of mindfulness in Buddhism and psychology, and why James is relevant to our investigations.

2. Defining mindfulness: Buddhist and psychological orientations

While mindfulness may appear to be a 'new' idea in Psychology, it actually has its roots in ancient Indian culture, around 2,500 years ago. I am using the term 'mindfulness' as an English translation of the Pali word *sati* (Rhys-Davids, 1890)¹; Pali being the early Indian language used to document the teachings of the historical Buddha, Mr. Gotama (Bodhi, 2005). *Sati* is one of the most difficult Pali words to translate and there has been much debate about its meaning alongside related terms such as attention (*manisakara*), clear comprehension (*sampajāna*) and consciousness (*viññāna*) (see Bodhi, 2011). For some, mindfulness is a concept, which denotes non-conceptual awareness, and therefore defies definition (Gunarātana, 2002). This poses unique difficulties for academic research on mindfulness, which requires it to be 'grasped' or captured by language.

Sati might be better translated as an 'awareness' which is both embodied and feelingful, but even this is vague compared to the often specific meanings given in the Pali Canon (Peacock, 2008). The early definition of *sati* preserved its recollective and ethical dimensions; the verb form *sarati* being translated as remembering or recollecting (Rhys-Davids, 1890, p. 52, pp. 58–59). In being mindful, we are remembering to bring to mind "what is otherwise too easily forgotten: the present moment" (Anālayo, 2003, p. 48). Mindfulness involves "recollection of the present moment, sustained awareness of what is happening to us and within us on each occasion of experience" (Bodhi, 2005, p. 262). It is a 'lucid awareness' of whatever is happening momentarily (Bodhi, 2011). We will bring more specificity to this definition later in the discussion by

describing how a mindful orientation is cultivated through meditation practice.²

"Right" or ethical mindfulness (*samma sati*) is just one element of the Buddhist path and one of the seven factors of awakening. However, when taken out of this context, mindfulness risks becoming de-ethicised and understood purely as a technique (Cohen, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2009). As Buddhism has started to gain more explicit attention in the mainstream of Western Psychology – increasingly in the last sixty years or so – it has tended to be approached as a *therapy*, to be studied and evaluated using established scientific methods, rather than as a religion, or a *bona fide* 'Psychology', as James once took it to be. The recent and growing interest in mindfulness and mindfulness meditation amongst medical practitioners, clinical psychologists, and neuroscientists is a case in point (see Didonna, 2009). In turn, mindfulness meditation is more likely to be approached by academic psychologists as an object of study – i.e. state, trait or experimental condition – rather than as a practice for them to do themselves (Baer, 2011). One consequence of the dominant positivist-objectivist scientific orientation towards mindfulness and meditation might be that we miss the potential experiential insights deriving from, and produced within, such practices. We will explore these below.

At this point, it suffices to say that the historically later, idiosyncratic translation of mindfulness as "bare attention" (Nyanaponika, 1965) – along with the influence of Humanistic Psychology (Dryden & Still, 2006) – made it possible for a de-ethicised understanding of mindfulness as "awareness and acceptance of present moment experience" to become popular (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Reclaiming the recollective and ethical dimension of mindfulness potentially allows it to become a style of experiential inquiry suitable for Psychology, which should be rooted in an awareness of the ethical consequences of our actions (Bradley, 2005). Also, from the present perspective, we can be mindfully aware in the present moment while we remember an event from the recent or distant past (e.g. the experience of forgetting a name, see Section 4).

It is helpful to clarify the background to this specific take on mindfulness. When taken as a historical creation, Western Buddhism can be understood as a "culture of awakening," rather than a religion in the Judeo-Christian sense of the term (Batchelor, 1997). To "wake up" existentially involves acting upon four "ennobling" tasks, rather than believing particular truths. Each person is invited to embrace *dukkha* (suffering, pain or unsatisfactoriness); let go of craving for things to be otherwise; realise the cessation of *dukkha*; and cultivate an

¹ Incidentally, in 1894/1895 James invited the British Pali scholar Thomas William Rhys-Davids to lecture at Harvard on 'Buddhism: Its History and Literatures'.

² Social psychologists maybe more familiar with the experimental social cognitive research on mindfulness by Langer (1989) and colleagues. Langer's is a non-Buddhist, non-meditative understanding of mindfulness. This mindfulness is a style of information processing involving the creation of new conceptual distinctions and categories, when we respond to what is happening in the present moment, rather than the past. There are clear similarities with early Buddhist definitions of mindfulness, perhaps more than contemporary psychological definitions (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2003), but the concepts are not the same and should be treated as distinct (see Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). In particular, I am understanding mindfulness as including awareness of bodily sensations, which are not addressed in Langer's definition. It is beyond the scope of this paper to compare them in detail (see Dryden & Still, 2006).

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