

Mindfulness: right and wrong

An excerpt from SD 60.1e: Delusion and Experience: epistemology, psychology and Abhidhamma, ©TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) 2023b

2.1.1 George Bernard Shaw's famous play *Pygmalion* (1912) is about how an English professor of phonetics, Henry Higgins, is able to transform a Cockney flower-girl, Eliza Doolittle, into a high-society lady through refinement of speech, mannerism and appearance. Higgins takes this on as a bet with a Colonel Pickering—that Higgins cannot effect the transformation. After a few months of coaching, he succeeds in turning Eliza into a proper English lady and wins the bet. After some interesting developments and near the play's end, Eliza, when her father announces that he is getting married, reverts to her Cockney accent.

Eliza herself, instead of marrying the bully and tyrant Higgins—who remains a bachelor out of love for his own mother—says, “Freddy's not a fool. And if he's weak and poor and wants me, may be he'd make me happier than my betters that bully me and don't want me,” and that, unlike Higgins, “I never thought of us making anything of one another; and you never think of anything else. I only want to be natural.” (Act 5). Shaw's romantic comedy pokes delightful fun at the superficial prejudices of the English class system with its petty attitudes and posturings.¹ As the play makes clear, the English class system is actual and damaging. The superficial elements are how the system is policed and regulated —accent and rules and rituals of conduct—and they are *superficial* in the sense that they are what exists on the surface, in appearances, even in religion.

One of the points of the play is to lay bare the space between class and moral goodness—Higgins is an immoral monster. Neither Eliza nor the audience are surprised when he hits her in the final minutes of the play. Eliza starts as a comic character because she is “vulgar” because of her accent, she ends as a tragic character because Higgins has revealed himself to be vulgar despite his class and refinement. In part, the play may arguably be a tragicomedy, since it reveals the cruelties of Victorian class realities in our own days.²

2.1.2 *Pygmalion*³ comes from a famous Greek myth about how a sculptor's beautiful statue of Galataea changes into a living woman. Shaw based his play on the *Pygmalion* myth, but in his play, he inverts the theme: it is Eliza (Galataea) who turns into a mechanical doll who resembles a duchess,” a puppet stringed by Professor Higgins. In the end, Eliza regains her truly human self and marries happily ever after, while the unloving Professor remains alone with himself, as it were, yet unborn.

¹ Accent is both marker and synecdoche for class in England—to have a regional accent is to be “lower” class, to have an RP accent (“received pronunciation” or “The King's English”) is to be upper. Eliza could have changed her deportment, behaviour, phraseology, everything which made her who she was—and Higgins would still have lost the bet if she had retained her accent.

² Thanks to Matt Jenkins (UK) for giving some living details of Shaw's play, “*Pygmalion*,” as the social realities of our own times.

³ On the Greek myth of *Pygmalion* and Galataea, see SD 60.1d (5.2.2.1).

It is not difficult to see how Buddhist mindfulness is depicted by Eliza, and those who conscript Mindfulness^{KZ} into their professional services to be like the Professor. The serious difficulties may be seen thus:

- (1) The transformation is always incomplete: Eliza is never “truly” upper class, she is only ever acting it. Mindfulness^{KZ} is never complete; we are never really healed. At best we heal the symptoms as they arise, but they never end, so long as we are caught in our current predicament, job, and so on.
- (2) That means she is never secure in it. However comfortable she may have been at the ball (Act 4) and however much she enjoyed moments in the process, she always knew she was teetering on a precipice from which she could fall. With Mindfulness^{KZ} we are not healed but acclimatized to better tolerate our working or living conditions; the real conditions of our problems remain causing the recurrent symptoms.
- (3) Here is the key point. Eliza is left between worlds—she has lost the comfort of her home-life without the security of a new status. We are given what Buddhism teaches, just a modified bit of it, but the “cure” we have learned merely deals with the symptoms. The original Buddhist teachings and practice, on the other hand, are, with the initial guidance of a proper teacher, a complete self-healing method—a training path—we can and must work with ourselves. [1.1.7.7]

The critical perspective here is not so much about the modern class consciousness amongst professionals (if it does exist), but more so about how we may have serious difficulties when we try to conscript ancient wisdom into modern professional service. Let the wise reflect on this rich and apt metaphor more profoundly, while we return to the matter of discovering more the metaphor’s theme, that is, the early Buddhist teaching on mindfulness.

Pygmalion—whether the Greek myth or Shaw’s play—reflects the dark realities of McMindfulness too. Kabat-Zinn creates McMindfulness—a hybrid of Frankenstein [1.1.4.5] and Galataea, or a female Frankenstein—It glorifies him, makes him fabulously rich and powerful, so that he denounces even the original teachings. He now defines his new class of Professionals by Class training and Training fees. Yet, below the Professional skin is a monster, a Dracula that induces all those it has touched to glorify Mindfulness^{KZ} and the Corporate Master to serve them more than well and not to bite the hands that feed them. This is a theme that other concerned writers will highlight. [1.1.2.1]

2.1.3 The early Pali texts define **mindfulness** (*sati*)⁴ more broadly than the later schools, which would understandably use the same basic definitions and foundations of related concepts. For example, all agree that “greed” (*lobha*) and “hatred” (*doṣa*; Skt *dveṣa*) are always

⁴ *Sati* first appears in Dhs list of dhammas [1.1.5.2] among the 5 faculties (*indriya*). It is also present as a path-factor (*magg’āṅga*), a power (*bala*), and a “helper” (*upakāra*). On mindfulness, see D 10.16 (7); SD 54.2e (2.3.4); on mindfulness & memory: SD 56.2 (5.1.1).

unwholesome; all agree that “concentration” (*samādhi*) might be either. In the case of “mindfulness,” however, there is a basic disagreement.⁵

According to Gethin, the Pali Abhidhamma⁶ takes “mindfulness” (*sati*) as an intrinsically wholesome quality. Hence, **the Abhidhamm’attha,saṅgaha**⁷ (ch 2, Cetasika Saṅgaha, on mental factors, §5) lists mindfulness as the 2nd of its 19 “universal beautiful factors” (*sobhana,sādhāraṇa*). Its modern guide (based on its commentaries) defines mindfulness as follows:

Mindfulness (*sati*): The word *sati* derives from a root meaning “to remember,” but as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past. It has the characteristic of not wobbling, ie not floating away from the object [1.1.8]. Its function is absence of confusion or non-forgetfulness. It is manifested as guardianship, or as the state of confronting an objective field. Its proximate cause is strong perception (*thira,saññā*) or the 4 foundations of mindfulness. (Abhs:BRS 86)

2.1.4 However, it should be noted that **the suttas**, in all the 5 Nikayas, and the Abhidhamma, often speak of both right mindfulness (*sammā,sati*) and “wrong mindfulness” (*micchā,sati*).⁸ The latter is the negative factors of the eightfold “wrong path” (*micchatta*, “wrongness”). The Pali Abhidhamma is being technical here, taking *sati* as meaning “proper attention” (*yoniso manasikāra*), while the suttas take *sati* broadly (as being polysemic), meaning either “proper attention” or “improper (wrong) attention” (*ayoniso manasikāra*), depending on the context. This is, clearly, the rule of context.⁹

Mindfulness—as proper attention—is never associated with consciousness rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion, but only with consciousness rooted in non-attachment and lovingkindness. In fact, the Abhidhamma states that mindfulness is a feature of *all* wholesome consciousnesses. When the minding is rooted in greed, hatred or delusion, it is not

⁵ Much of this section follows Gethin, “Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness,” in (ed) K W Brown et al, *Handbook of Mindfulness*, 2015b, which is a helpful comparative survey of how the early schools define **mindfulness**.

⁶ Gethin 2015b:21; he does not mention “Abhidhamma” in this sentence. However, it is clear that in this paragraph (2015b:21 para 3) he is discussing Abhidhamma. See Noa Ronkin, “Abhidhamma,” Stanford Ency of Philosophy, 2022: <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=abhidharma>.

⁷ “Compendium on the Meaning of Abhidhamma” [Abhs] written by a relatively unknown Ācariya Anuruddha, prob an elder (the abbot?) of Mūlasoma Vihāra in Polonnaruva, around the turn of the 11th cent. In Burma, Abhs is revered as the 1st of the 9 “little-finger manuals” (*let-than*) [Abhs:BRS 15].

⁸ On *micchā,sati*: **Saṅgīti S** (D 33/3:254,26), **Das’uttara S** (D 34/3:287,2, 290,26, 291,22); **Sallekha S** (M 8/1:42,26), SD 51.8; **Dvedhā Vitakka S** (M 19/1:118,9), SD 61.1, **Mahā Cattarīsaka S** (M 117/3:77,7 f), SD 6.10, **Bhūmija S** (M 126/3:140,8), SD 73.4; **S** 14.27/2:168, 22.84/3:109, 45.1/5:1, 45.12/5:13, 45.18/5:16, 45.21-26/5:18-20, 55.383/5:383; **A** 4.205/2:220-229, 5.120/3:141, (A 6.30/3:328 has a wrong form of *anussati*), 8.34/4:237, 10.103/5:212, 10.105/5:214, 10.106/5:215, 10.107/5:217, 10.108/5:219, 10.110/5:220, 10.111/5:221, 10.113/5:222, 10.114/5:224, 10.115/5:228, 10.116/5:231, 10.117/5:232, 10.132/5:240, 10.134-170/5:240-253; **Nm** 1:78, 137; **Pm** 2:88, 90; **Vbh** 373, 387, 392. Gethin 2015b:21; at the bottom of the same page, Gethin says “the earliest Buddhist texts ... contrast ‘right mindfulness’ with ‘wrong mindfulness’.” See Analayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, 2003: 52 n31. See also [1.3.11.6 f].

⁹ On the rule of context or the contextuality rule, see SD 60.1d (7.7.2.7).

“right mindfulness”; we are said to be “unmindful.” In this sense, according to Abhidhamma, there is no “wrong mindfulness.” We are either mindful or not.¹⁰

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¹⁰ The numerous refs to “wrong mindfulness” [n above] seem to contradict Comy view that *sati* is an exclusively *wholesome* mental factor (eg DhsA 250). This Comy view poses a practical difficulty: how do we reconcile *sati* as a wholesome factor with satipatthanas in terms of the hindrances, if wholesome and unwholesome mental qualities cannot coexist in the same mental state? Comy attempts to resolve this by suggesting that satipatthana of a defiled mind is a quick alternation between mind-moments associated with *sati* and those under the influence of defilements (eg MAPṬ 1:373). Analayo rejects this explanation, “since with either the defilement or else *sati* being absent, *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation of the presence of a defilement in one’s mind becomes impossible (cf eg the instructions for contemplating the hindrances, which clearly refer to such a hindrance being present during *satipaṭṭhāna* practice: “he knows ‘there is ... in me’” (M 1:60) (2003a:52 n31). See Gethin, *The Buddhist Path*, 1992:40-43; Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, 1949:68-72. According to Sarvāstivāda, *sati* is an indeterminate mental factor (Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, 1922:101).