

Article

All Is Burning: Buddhist Mindfulness as Radical Reflection

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Abstract: This paper consists of two parts. In the first part (Section 1, part of Section 2), I put forward a critique of what I refer to as the ‘received’ or ‘standard’ view of mindfulness in the Western cultural milieu. According to the received view, mindfulness is the acontextual ‘core’ of Buddhism whose determining characteristic is bare (present-oriented, non-judgmental) attention to the flow and content of experience. As noted by many researchers, this conception is in stark contrast to the traditional Buddhist understanding, where mindfulness is not only embedded in a broader context that provides it with a specific philosophico-existential orientation (normative aspect) but is also construed as a reflective activity (noetic aspect). In the second part (part of Sections 2–4), I argue that one of the main issues with the standard view is that it frames experience in terms of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls ‘objective thought’ (using objectivity, or ‘thinghood’, as an onto-epistemological standard of reality), which makes the two aspects of the traditional conception (normative and noetic) unintelligible. I then provide an alternative view based on the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that attempts to integrate the two aspects into a broader conception of experience. By drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s notions of ‘phenomenal field’ and ‘radical reflection’, I argue that mindfulness needs to be understood as a reflective attitude that allows one to discern not only the content but also, and primarily, the context of each experience, and that this also includes seeing itself—the act of reflection—as an act that stems from, and returns back into, the pre-reflective current of existence.



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1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a heated discussion on the promises and perils of introducing mindfulness into the Western cultural milieu. Usually, the discussion is framed in terms of a dispute between two diametrically opposed camps, which—as is often the case with such dichotomous divides—presents a somewhat simplistic image of the actual discursive field, but is, if appropriate hermeneutic measures are taken and the polyphony of the views is not lost sight of, nonetheless useful in delineating two extreme positions towards which discussants tend to gravitate.

On the one hand, we find ‘traditionalists’ who argue that, by being severed from its original context with its unique set of ethico-soteriological ideals, modern mindfulness has morphed into something that is connected to its Buddhist roots by name only. Additionally, since there is no way of predicting how this altered phenomenon will behave in the new environment, there are legitimate concerns (a) that it may be used to deleterious ends, e.g., by subordinating it to the logics of the corporate world with the aim of producing mindlessly hyperproductive automatons, or (b) that it may occasion or facilitate unpleasant and potentially dangerous experiences, such as severe anxiety, depression, and psychotic episodes.

On the other hand, there are ‘modernists’ who argue that, throughout its history, Buddhism has proven to be extremely pliable, undergoing multifarious modifications both internally (by giving rise to various schools and traditions) and externally (by forming syncretistic amalgams with other religio-philosophical traditions), and that, if these modifications can be deemed ‘authentic’, there is no a priori reason to dispute the validity

of recent developments in the West. Furthermore, by separating mindfulness from its religious and philosophical heritage and wedding it with, say, modern psychotherapy and science, it is hoped that not only will it acquire a more rigorous epistemic grounding and wide-reaching practical utility, but that it will also take on unique forms that are more amenable to life in the secularized West.

I have explored the ‘traditionalist–modernist debate’ at length in my previous work (see [Vörös 2016a, 2016b](#)) and will therefore not recapitulate the argumentative subtleties involved on both sides of the polemical fence. Instead, I will utilize the said debate, and some of the conclusions I have reached pertaining to it, as a framework for what will be a decidedly *philosophical* inquiry.¹ I will do this in two steps. In the first (critical) step (Section 1, part of Section 2), I will outline a critique of what can be considered as a predominant modern(ist) understanding of mindfulness (so-called ‘received view’); then, in the second (constructive) part (part of Sections 2–4), I will try to flesh out an alternative view based on the phenomenological reading of the traditional Buddhist framework.

The critical part will examine what I believe to be one of the main shortcomings of the received view, namely, its construal of mindfulness as the acontextual ‘core’ of the Buddhist thought-practice,² whose main feature is bare attention to the present moment. In contrast, mindfulness in the traditional Buddhist setting is embedded into a *broader* (*philosophico-existential*) horizon and is, as I will argue, a decidedly *reflective* practice. By drawing on the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly on his critique of so-called ‘objective thought’ and his exposition of ‘phenomenal field’ and ‘radical reflection’, I will try to expound an alternative way of thinking about mindfulness as an attitude that allows us to reflectively engage with lived experience, without thereby forgetting that the act of reflection itself stems from, and returns back into, that selfsame experience.

2. Mindfulness as Bare Attention: A Critique

Let us start with the critical part. The view of mindfulness that I will be critiquing in this section has been extremely influential in both the scientific and therapeutic communities, as well as society at large. Despite recent criticisms³ and calls for reform⁴, it still enjoys widespread intellectual currency and could be, with some justification,⁵ labeled as the ‘received’ or ‘standard view’ of mindfulness in the West. Of course, not all researchers and scholars subscribe to the received view,⁶ and many have noted that it has been the end product of a long and complex, but also heavily ideology-laden and interest-driven, historical development.⁷ However, since my primary interest here is to delineate certain philosophically problematic features of the received view in its current—and one might add, somewhat idealized—form, a detailed examination of these aspects exceeds the purview of this essay.

The central feature of the received view that I would like to focus on is vividly illustrated by the now (in)famous ‘definition’ provided by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who characterized mindfulness as ‘paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally’ ([Kabat-Zinn 1994](#), p. 4). Although Kabat-Zinn never intended this to be an exhaustive rendition of what mindfulness is—after all, it was put forward in a non-scholarly book aimed at a broader audience—his construal nevertheless trickled into the scientific community and eventually crystallized in the form of a common operational definition. Here are some variations on the theme from the subsequent literature:

‘Bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis.’ ([Marlatt and Kristeller 1999](#), p. 68)

‘[A] process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance.’ ([Bishop et al. 2004](#), p. 234)

‘[A] psychological construct associated with nonjudgmental attention and awareness of present-moment experiences.’ (Long and Christian 2015, p. 1409)

A common thread running through these and similar renditions is the idea that ‘mindfulness’ consists in non-elaboratively, non-judgementally, and non-responsively attending to the content of one’s immediate experience: fleeting occurrences of sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. For instance, when I am mindfully attending to a tingling sensation in one of my legs or a sudden upwelling of anger, I am not reflecting on the nature, origin, or context of the sensation/affect, but rather acknowledging its presence, becoming aware of its unique phenomenal quality, and allowing it to gradually subside. Note that the standard construal often feeds into a dual-process conception of mentation, which rests on the idea of a pronounced dichotomy between passive ‘sensation’ (‘receptivity’) and active ‘cognition’ (‘thought’). Because mindfulness is characterized as ‘bare’, ‘non-judgemental’, ‘passive’, etc., it is portrayed as fundamentally inimical to reflective activity, which is said to sever ties with the immediacy of the present moment, bring into play our conceptual capacities, and project our attention to the past/future and the general/abstract.

Now, the tacit endorsement of the sensation–cognition dichotomy and the corresponding emphasis on passivity, observation, and receptivity at the expense of activity, ideation, and thought have a peculiar consequence. That is, if their implications are fully taken on board, they turn *mindfulness* into a conspicuously *mindless* enterprise: the less you are involved and the more you simply observe, the better the practice and the profounder the result. In other words, as with good medicine, mindfulness meditation is supposed to work, so to speak, *behind one’s back*: just like the proverbial apple, or regular brushing of one’s teeth, mindfulness a day keeps the (somatic and mental) doctor away. Additionally, just as what *ultimately* matters with tooth brushing or eating apples is the result of a well-defined technique and the (neuro)physiological effect it produces, and not how it tastes/feels like or how we reflectively position ourselves towards (the experience of) this activity, what ultimately matters with mindfulness is the *technique itself* and the (neuro)physiological *mechanism* it induces. Put differently, in the standard view, mindfulness is construed as a (semi)mechanical process that, once instantiated, works in and of itself, i.e., passively, without the meditator’s taking on an active reflective, discriminating attitude.⁸

This might be one of the reasons why mindfulness tends to be conceived of as (very much akin to) a *relaxation-inducing* or *attention-enhancing technique*, or even—as with Herbert Benson (2001)—a *semi-reflex response*, and not as an *epistemic practice* (however broadly construed). Additionally, this might also explain why contemporary research is so bent on uncovering neurocognitive mechanisms of mindfulness meditation: meditation is taken to be a well-defined (discrete) technique (distinct pattern of behavior) which, correspondingly, leads to well-defined (discrete) changes in one’s neurophysiology (distinct affective, behavioral, etc., states and processes), which are responsible for its relaxation-inducing, attention-enhancing, etc., effects. Such a conception allows science and therapeutic practice to express a genuine interest in the phenomenon, without having it infringe on its carefully guarded citadel of knowledge.

This seemingly paradoxical state of affairs—that of a purportedly mindful practice ending up as a decidedly mindless endeavor—is, in my view, closely related to one of the main concerns voiced by traditionalist critics. That is, the received view often portrays itself not as *yet another* (re)interpretation of mindfulness on par with previous (re)interpretations, but as a *singularly unique one*, in that, unlike its predecessors, it believes it has managed to distil, from the traditional setting, the *essence* or *heart* of Buddhist thought-practice. In other words, while most, if not all, traditional permutations can still be said to operate within exegetical, normative, etc., frameworks, what makes the received view unique is its insistence on discarding these ‘secondary’ factors and focusing exclusively on (the) mindfulness (practice) itself. The modernist appropriation thus makes the claim that its ultimate goal is not to *re-contextualize* mindfulness but to *de-contextualize* it: to uncover, underneath the thick layer of *conceptual superstructures*, i.e., contingent cognitive/discursive

(re)framings of mindfulness, a level of *experiential substructure*, i.e., a pre-cognitive/pre-discursive level of bare receptivity.

I believe that traditionalists are right in maintaining that such a view is not only theoretically tenuous, but also potentially pernicious. Not only is it the case that every appropriation *is* (re)contextualization, but it is also the case that, if the parameters of this (re)contextualization are not at least partly *explicitated*, the appropriated item will be embedded into an *implicit framework* of beliefs, norms, etc., endorsed by the appropriating party. Additionally, since these beliefs, norms, etc., are not openly acknowledged, but are—in the name of the officially sanctified, but ultimately unattainable, ideal of de-contextualization—proclaimed to be non-existent, they cannot become a topic of critical inquiry. This seems to be the case with the received view, which, although promulgated under the aegis of ideological and normative neutrality, is permeated with *individualism*, *secularism*, and *scientism*, all of which are important determinants of the contemporary socio-ideational landscape (Purser 2019).

Note that, although I *do* think that such ideological fusions *are* problematic, I am, at this juncture, merely making a fairly trivial point that they are present, *regardless* of the positive or negative attributes one may wish to ascribe to them. More important for our purposes, however, is the fact that it is precisely this tacit modern(ist) (re)contextualization that provides the ongoing sustenance for the paradoxical nature of the received view of mindfulness. As inhabitants of modern secular and science-oriented societies, we have grown so accustomed to these socio-ideational determinants that they seem self-evident, even though they are, in fact, founded on very specific and far from unquestionable presuppositions. That is why, in the last section, I try to show that many of the problematic characteristics of the received view can be said to stem from a tacit acceptance of one such presupposition, the so-called ‘objective thought’.

However, I also share with the modernists the concern that the straightforward transplantation of the traditional Buddhist framework into a new socio-cultural milieu may not be most conducive to bringing mindfulness and/or other aspects of Buddhist thought-practice into dialogue with the Western culture, particularly its own philosophical heritage. There needs to be room for open and critical discussion of different factors that are involved in such transmission, especially those pertaining to concrete socio-political values of both cultures (gender roles, social relations, political organization, etc.). Interestingly enough, adopting a *radical* traditionalist (‘literalist’) stance on the matter proves to be similar to what we have said about the modernist conception of mindfulness, in that it seems to invest certain *external forms and practices*—ceremonies, precepts, rituals, etc.—with mechanical-like properties, tacitly implying that, if one adheres to such-and-such an activity, such-and-such results will follow. In both cases, there is the same pattern of infusing an *external something*—a context-free practice or change-free context—with an *almost magical causative agency*, which is supposed to guarantee the legitimacy of the phenomenon in question. In both cases, the agentive force is relegated to an impersonal factor, be it a cognitive (neuro)mechanism or socio-cultural framework, instead of it being anchored in the existential attitude of the *person* engaged in mindfulness practice (see also note 19).

For this reason, I propose a *via tertia*. The phenomenon under scrutiny—in this case, mindfulness embedded in the traditional Buddhist context—should be approached with the *attitude of reflective openness*. That is, we have to remain *genuinely open* to the possibility of *reasonable modifications* in light of the culturo-ideational dynamics of the new milieu while insisting that these modifications occur not on their own accord, but *reflectively*, i.e., in a way that, despite the possible alterations of ‘the letter’, preserves, to the best of our ability, ‘the spirit’—the (philosophical) significance—of the phenomenon. However, this can only be achieved if one thoroughly *understands* the significance of the phenomenon in the culturo-ideational setting which gave rise to it; this, in turn, calls for *rigorous hermeneutical work*.

What I mean by this is the following: whenever I try to understand a certain alien tradition or text, or, in short, the Other, a *bidirectional (dialogical) movement* has to take

place. On the one hand, I necessarily bring *myself*—my own tacit assumptions, norms, etc.—into the encounter, which colors how I approach, probe, etc., the Other; on the other hand, through tensions, obstacles, etc., which I run up against when grappling with its significations, the *Other, as a whole*, imposes itself on me, making me aware of my tacit presuppositions and urging me to bend, modify, or abandon them. For there to be a *genuine (hermeneutic) understanding*, both myself and the Other have to undergo a transformation: the Other, with its alien significations, calls on me to break through myself in order to find my(-new-)self; I, in my culturo-historical situatedness, call on the Other to realize/manifest a signification which, thus far, has only been latently present in its being.

This, then, will be the main goal of the second (constructive) part of this paper: to hermeneutically grapple with the meaning of mindfulness in the Buddhist context by approaching it from the position of a philosophical tradition—phenomenology—which, on the one hand, has its fingers firmly on the pulse of the Western tradition while recognizing, on the other hand, the embeddedness of each culturo-ideational framing into a larger context of human existence. Before I proceed to the topic, however, a few brief words on the background I will be drawing on.

On the Buddhist side, I will draw exclusively on the *Pāli canon*, more specifically on its *Sutta Piṭaka* ('basket' or collection of the Buddha's discourses), as preserved in the Theravāda tradition. In my previous investigations, I have made use of various traditions—in addition to Theravāda, I also relied on Mahāmudrā (Vörös 2016b) and Chan/Zen (Vörös 2016a, 2019)—but have later come to realize that, as this tends to open a whole new can of historical, hermeneutical and exegetical worms, it would be more conducive to the rigor of the inquiry to limit its scope to one single tradition. The Pāli canon is the most comprehensive extant canon of the early Buddhist teachings, which are, at least partially,⁹ present in all subsequent Buddhist traditions. As such, it is the closest textual evidence we have of the teachings of the historical Buddha.¹⁰ Further, the past fifty years have witnessed extremely interesting, but unfortunately chronically understudied, developments *within* the Theravāda tradition itself. Some of these developments can be traced back to the works of Nāṇavīra Thera (2009) and have recently gained fresh impetus in the works of Akiñcano (2019), Nāṇamoli Thero (2014), and others. What is characteristic of this particular 'school of thought'—if that it may be called—is a philosophically ingenious reading of the early suttas through the lens of existential phenomenology, which brings it close to what I will be intending in this paper, albeit from a somewhat different angle.

On the philosophical side, I will, as mentioned, draw on the phenomenological tradition in general and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular. The traditionalist-modernist debate has illuminated some of the 'neuralgic points' of the received view, which have been overlooked or ignored in the initial stages of the cross-cultural dialogue. Phenomenology has not only provided means for an ingenious critical analysis of these neuralgic points—particularly the already mentioned 'objective thought'—but has also put forward alternative ways of investigating the intricate texture of lived experience. This makes it, as I will argue, a more suitable framework for a rigorous (re)conceptualization of mindfulness, in light of which it becomes clearer why mindfulness and other dimensions of Buddhist thought-practice may be of interest to the Western philosophical tradition.

3. Mindfulness in Context I: Horizons of Suffering

When we compare the received view with its traditional counterparts, the first thing we notice is that, while the former construes mindfulness as a self-standing practice of bare (present-oriented, value-neutral) attention, the latter sees it as but *one segment* within a *broader framework*, namely, that of the 'Noble Eightfold Path' (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*), which—in addition to *right* mindfulness (*sammā sati*)—consists of *right* view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), *right* intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), *right* speech (*sammā vācā*), *right* action (*sammā kammanta*), *right* livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), *right* effort (*sammā vāyāma*), and *right* concentration (*sammā samādhi*) (e.g., SN 56.11).¹¹ Now, given that this framework is both *omni-temporal*, in that it pertains not only to the present but also to the past and future,¹² and *normative*, in that it

explicitly distinguishes ‘right’ (*sammā*; also: good, wholesome) from ‘wrong’ (*miccha*; also: bad, unwholesome) attitudes, there seems to be a blatant discrepancy between the two conceptions from the very get-go.¹³

The advocate of the received view might respond that this is not really a problem, as his/her goal is not to align him/herself with Buddhist orthodoxy, but to focus on what would be of most benefit for the modern therapeutics. Additionally, if this turns out to be one of the segments of the Eightfold Path, then it is perfectly legitimate to extricate that particular segment from the overall framework and ignore the rest. The problem with this response, however, is that it is founded on a dubious presupposition—one which will resurface in many guises throughout this essay—that a given phenomenon, if removed from its context, retains the identity it had within that context. From the Buddhist point of view, this is decidedly *not* the case: the various segments of the Path should *not* be seen as *discrete parts of a summative whole* (Path \neq sum of eight distinct elements), but rather as *interpenetrating aspects of a unified whole* (Path = uniform field consisting of eight interrelated moments).

This last point is famously illustrated by the symbol of the eight-spoked wheel, designating the Buddha as the one who set the ‘wheel of Dhamma [teaching]’ in motion (SN 56.11). Now, in order for the wheel to be *functional*—or to *be* a wheel at all—all eight spokes need to be present and properly interrelated. Thus, if one of the aspects is removed, both the whole *and* the aspects—the removed one included—undergo a *qualitative* change, i.e., they acquire a completely different value and significance, just as each visual segment in the famous duck–rabbit image has a completely different significance, orientation, etc., depending on whether it is apprehended as part of a duck or as part of a rabbit. In fact, it is precisely this *interpenetration* of various aspects of the Path that characterizes each separate aspect as ‘right’ (in line with the Path as a whole) or as ‘wrong’ (not in line with the Path as a whole).

However, what is it that confers the Path with a unified meaning? According to the Buddhist tradition, the Path needs to be construed *as a whole* because it provides a *wholesome response*—i.e., a response that encompasses our whole being (and not only, say, our cognitive or behavioral dimension)—to an *all-encompassing existential problem*. The problem in question is stated concisely in *The Simile of the Snake* sutta: ‘Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering’ (MN 22, i 140). This, in turn, is but a formulaic expression of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*), which constitute the very marrow of the Buddhist thought-practice:

- (1) The *First Noble Truth* states that there is suffering (*dukkha*);
- (2) The *Second Noble Truth* states that the origin of suffering is craving (*taṇhā*; also: thirst, desire);
- (3) The *Third Noble Truth* states that there is a way that leads to the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering;
- (4) The *Fourth Noble Truth* states that there is the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering (DN 22, ii 306–14; MN 10, i 62; SN 56.11).

The ultimate role of the Noble Eightfold Path (see the Fourth Noble Truth), then, is to provide an existentially comprehensive solution (see the Third Noble Truth) to the problem of suffering (see the First Noble Truth) founded on craving (see the Second Noble Truth). The reason why the solution in question can be characterized as ‘existentially comprehensive’ is because it holistically encompasses *all* dimensions of our being: (i) *behavioral-affective* through the cultivation of *virtue* (*sīla*; right speech, right action, and right livelihood), (ii) *attentive-reflective* through the cultivation of *concentration* (*saṃādhi*; right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration), and (iii) *cognitive-noetic* through the cultivation of *wisdom* (*paññā*; right view and right intention).

In light of this, perhaps the best way to characterize Buddhist thought-practice would be in terms of what the French philosopher Pierre Hadot (1995) calls *philosophy as a way of life*, ‘a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life’ (ibid., p. 265). Philosophy,

in the Hadotian sense, is not merely an art of thinking *or* seeing well but also encompasses—and fundamentally—the art of *being well*. As such, it includes a whole array of so-called ‘spiritual exercises’ (*exercices spirituels*) (ibid., p. 59): in addition to disciplined thought, it also encompasses physical *askesis*, disciplined monologue and dialogue, reading and exegesis, examinations of consciousness, exercises of imagination, etc. By these lights, the practice of mindfulness could be characterized as one of the spiritual exercises aimed at embodying what is ultimately a philosophical, i.e., wise, virtuous¹⁴, and content, way of life. Most importantly, its impetus, significance, and orientation are (co)determined by the other aspects of the Path, as well as by the ultimate goal of the Path as a whole, which is to attain final liberation from any and all unpleasantness of existence (*nibbāna*).

Again, the advocate of the received view may respond that, despite the *superficial* differences, the two approaches, traditional and modern, share the same *fundamental goal*, namely, the cessation of suffering. Therefore, as long as contemporary approaches, even if they do so in seemingly heterodox and idiosyncratic ways, help alleviate suffering, they could still be said to embody the fundamental orientation of Buddhist thought-practice. However, looks, or in this case words, can be deceiving, sometimes to an *insufferable* degree. The first thing to note is that, in Buddhism, the idea of suffering is brimming with nuance and variation. In general, we can differentiate three types of suffering (SN 45.165; see also Gethin 1998, pp. 60–62):

- (1) Suffering due to suffering (*dukkha dukkhatā*). The first kind of suffering pertains to experiences we are all too familiar with: physical pain, mental anguish, illness, old age, death, etc. The brute rawness of pain, the wretched pangs of sorrow, the ineradicable chasm of loss—all these, and more, fall under the first category, which, we immediately notice, constitutes the main, and sometimes sole, focus of the standard view.
- (2) Suffering due to change (*viparināma dukkhatā*). However, in the Buddhist tradition, there is a further, and more subtle, type of suffering, pertaining to the fact that, moment by moment, everything we experience is liable to change. The chocolate I have found so delicious after my morning run gives way to the feeling of heaviness and slight repulsion; the person I fell madly in love with a year ago now seems like a distant stranger with whom I can barely converse. Some things change more quickly, some more slowly—but they all *do* change, *inevitably* so.
- (3) Suffering due to formations (*saṅkhāra dukkhatā*). However, the story does not end here. Not only do things change, but they are, by their very nature, intrinsically impermanent. Once we fully grasp, *in our own experience*, the implications of the second type of suffering, *viparināma dukkhatā*, we realize that, even when they seem to exude the air of stability and permanence, things are conditioned with, and thus maintained in existence by, other things. In the midst of summer, there is winter; at the very height of youth and vigor, there is old age and death. Thus, instead of dealing with permanent entities, we are confronted by temporary stabilizations in otherwise dynamically shifting structures of experience. With *saṅkhāra dukkhatā*, we have, as Descartes puts it so poignantly, ‘slipped into a deep whirlpool’, where we can ‘neither touch bottom with [our] foot nor swim back to the surface’ (Descartes 2008, p. 17).

Therefore, when traditional and modern accounts refer to suffering, are they talking about the same thing? Yes, they are using the *same word*, but does that word carry the *same meaning*? Yet, surely, one may retort, *any* alleviation of suffering, even if limited solely to the *first* type, is better than none. Well, it depends. If a person found him/herself trapped in a burning building, would it be of benefit to him/her if I tried to calm him/her down by gestures of affection or pharmaceutical means of sedation? From the Buddhist point of view, this is precisely the predicament we are in: our house of being is aflame, and nothing—literally (as we will see): *no thing*—can provide shelter. Thus, insofar as we have failed to get to the very root of suffering (to the very source of the fire), we are merely *managing* it (by, say, shuffling from one room to another), which means that it can consume

us at any given moment. Furthermore, by simply managing the symptoms, we may be lulled into complacency and thus effectively prevented from attaining the ability to *uproot* suffering, thereby prolonging or even exacerbating its existential sting.

It is therefore no surprise that, in the early Buddhist texts, one finds many exhortations to the monks, cautioning them not to become negligent about their thought-practice.¹⁵ ‘The Fire Sermon’ (SN 35.28), whose opening I used as an introductory quote to this paper, is a telling case in point. Similarly, in ‘The Simile of the Mountain’, the Buddha conveys the inescapability of old age and death with the image of four mountains, ‘high as the clouds’ and ‘crushing all living beings’, that are said to be approaching us from the north, south, west, and east (SN 3.25, 101). In both cases, there is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide—so, what is to be done? The texts are clear: take on a life dedicated to investigating, understanding, and eventually dispelling these deep-rooted existential phantoms.

Note that the similes of fire, mountain, etc., should not be read as expressions of fatalist resignation, but rather as means of evoking a *sense of dire urgency*: our existence, be it as present actuality or future possibility, is pervaded with (different types of) suffering; this fundamental fact is not to be ignored or trivialized, but systematically explored and grappled with. Can we breathe this stressful point away—and even if we could, should we? Or should we, instead, seek a solution to the *existential predicament as a whole*, even if this means we will have to—for some time at least, but perhaps indefinitely—forgo the lull of superficial ease and accept the sense of profound dis-ease?

From the traditional Buddhist perspective, what provides the ultimate normative framework for our thought-practice is precisely the fact that our everyday existence—the structure of our lived experience—is such that makes us liable to suffering. This has two important implications. Firstly, and as already mentioned, it is in light of this existential horizon—in light of the question whether, and to what degree, a certain approach helps us understand and alleviate existential suffering—that this approach is characterized as ‘right/wholesome’ or ‘wrong/unwholesome’. To reiterate: the goal is to subdue not only the real instances of suffering—the *actuality* of suffering (*dukkha dukkhatā*)—but also the structural factors that pervade the horizon of our being—the *possibility* of suffering (*viparināma dukkhatā* and *sankhāra dukkhatā*). This, however, requires not just an eradication of *certain contents* of experience, e.g., anxious feelings or obsessive thoughts, but a transformation of its *overall context*, of one’s attitude towards *any content* of experience. Put differently, any lasting change of one’s *viewpoint*—*what* and *how one sees*—requires a radical change of one’s *standpoint*—*what* and *how one is*: the way one sees *and* behaves, emotes, thinks, wills, etc. Anything that is not conducive to, or even positively hinders, the achievement of this ultimate end is—even if it provides temporary respite—ultimately wrong/unwholesome.

This has important practical consequences. If, for instance, unpleasant experiences arise during meditation—as they in fact do (Farias et al. 2020; Lindahl et al. 2017; Schlosser et al. 2019)—the received view, wedded to the notion of mindfulness as an attention-improving and calming exercise, has but little resources to make sense of them and is prone to label them as aberrations, as detrimental ‘side effects’ or ‘pitfalls’. However, in the traditional context, where the emphasis is not on attaining serenity *at any cost*, but in and through wise and virtuous engagement with the structure of human existence, they are something to be expected and skilfully worked with. Put differently: if the emphasis is not on bare observation or temporary relief, but on *existential work*, then unpleasant (painful, scary, etc.) experiences are, so to speak, ‘part of the bargain’, and not anomalous curiosities.

Secondly, if the existential horizon is what provides the ultimate normative framework for the Buddhist thought-practice—if, that is, Buddhist thought-practice confines itself to *the realm of lived experience* and has no pretence, at least with regard to its soteriological goal (cessation of suffering), to overstep its bounds and engage in investigating ‘reality in itself’¹⁶—then what are needed are *means for reflectively exploring and understanding this horizon*. Clearly, the existential structures that are conducive of all, but particularly deeper, aspects of suffering are not manifestly given to us *prima facie*; if this were the case, they

would be transparent even to the ‘ordinary person’ (*puṭhujjana*), which clearly they are not. However, if we stay within the bounds of the existential horizon, it is equally wrong to say that they are completely foreign to us, as is the case with certain theoretical posits, e.g., atoms or monads, which are not experientable in principle; they are, as we will see, *lived but not thematized*. What is required, then, is the following: on the one hand, one must not stay enmeshed with one’s lived experience, but must enact a reflective (di)stance in order to discriminate and understand the contents and, even more importantly, context of one’s experience; on the other hand, while allowing for a discriminatory hiatus, this reflective stance must stay anchored in experience. Proper understanding of mindfulness needs to take both of these criteria on board, and I will try to suggest a way of doing so in Section 5.

4. Mindfulness in Context II: Historicity and Normativity

At this point, the reader may become impatient: that is all good and well, but how, then, is mindfulness construed in the traditional context, and how does it differ from the received view? From our preceding reflections, we can draw the following conclusion: each segment of the Eightfold Path (mindfulness included) must, if it is to be conceived as ‘right/wholesome’, i.e., as co-implicatory of other segments and in accordance with the Path as a whole, encompass two dimensions: normative and noetic. That is to say, it must be in line with the *normative criterion* of alleviating suffering in the broadest existential sense, and it must, for this purpose, provide *noetic means* for engagement with lived experience. If this is taken on board, then two characteristics of the traditional understanding of mindfulness that have been a source of bafflement for the received view become much clearer.

To begin with, the original meaning of *sati*, the Pāli word for mindfulness, is ‘memory’. This seems to stand in stark contrast to the standard view of mindfulness as bare attention: if our goal is to be fully, and exclusively, aware of what is happening here and now, one cannot but wonder how memory enters the picture. However, if mindfulness is understood not as attending to the here and now, but as reflecting on the *current contents of experience* against the background of the *general context of existence*, the association between mindfulness and memory becomes more evident. Each content of experience is a temporal, processual formation (*saṅkhāra*), which conditions, and is conditioned by, other—past, present, and even future—formations in the experiential field. For this reason, and when reflecting on any particular experiential occurrence, I must not hold on to a discrete content that I am confronted with—this sensation, this feeling, etc.—but must retain and explore the existential horizon against which it appears: I must, so to speak, *re-collect* the various (affective, cognitive, etc.) threads that brought this formation ‘to fruition’ (more on this in the next section).

Secondly, the traditional account of mindfulness—and, again, in contradistinction to the received understanding—is explicitly evaluative. In the Pāli sūtas, *sati* is, for instance, compared to a gatekeeper e.g., (AN 7, 67), guarding the gates of the senses and deciding which phenomena may (not) enter the fortress of experience. This means three things. First, as already mentioned, mindfulness is not a value-neutral observation, but a *value-laden discrimination* between what is and what is not conducive (right/wholesome or wrong/unwholesome) to the overarching goal, which is the ultimate cessation of suffering. Secondly, mindfulness is not passive registering, but *active inquiry* into the origin, nature, and implication of phenomena. Additionally, since phenomena are evaluated in light of their valence and signification, they are not considered ‘in themselves’ but *in how they pertain to me, to the fullness of my being*. That is, after all, the original meaning of a ‘phenomenon’ as *that which appears*—and what appears, *appears to someone*. Thirdly, and relatedly, mindfulness is not abstract, disengaged thought, but *engaged reflection on concrete experience*, which is characterized by the ineradicable interweaving of what appears and to whom it appears.

The idea that mindfulness is a profoundly reflective, and thus noetic, activity is vividly attested to by the fact that classical accounts—e.g., in the famous *The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness* (MN 10) and *The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness*

(DN 22) (but also in many other suttas)—abound with epistemic/gnostic notions, such as: ‘clear knowing/comprehension’ (*sampajañña*), ‘knowing’ or ‘understanding’ (*pajānāti*), ‘considering’ or ‘reviewing’ (*paccavekkhati*), ‘comparing’ or ‘collecting’ (*upasaṃharati*), ‘contemplating’ (*anapassati*), ‘wise attention’ or ‘wise reflection’ (*yoniso manasikāra*) (see [Anālayo 2003](#), pp. 59–60, 114–15, 119, 136–37).

By way of illustration, take the following two passages from the beginning of *The Discourse* (note especially how, from the very beginning, the establishing of mindfulness is related to ‘contemplation’, ‘clear comprehension’, and ‘understanding/knowing’):

‘Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu abides contemplating [*anupassī*] the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending [Bodhi: fully aware; *sampajañño*], and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings [. . .] mind as mind [. . .] mind-objects as mind-objects [. . .]’

and

‘And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands [or knows, *pajānāti*]: ‘I breathe in long’, or breathing out long, he understands: ‘I breathe out long.’ [. . .] Again, bhikkhus, when walking, a bhikkhu understands: ‘I am walking’; when standing, he understands: ‘I am standing’; when sitting, he understands: ‘I am sitting’; when lying down, he understands: ‘I am lying down’; or he understands accordingly however his body is disposed. [. . .]’ (MN 10, i 56–57)

If one is still not convinced that mindfulness, traditionally, was construed in broader terms, let us look at a different example. Consider the central role that, in the traditional accounts, is attributed to practices, such as ‘mindfulness of death’ (*marāṇasati*; AN 6.19, 6.20; MN 10) or ‘reflections on repulsiveness’ (*paṭikkūlamānasikāra*; DN 22, 28; MN 10). In death mindfulness, for instance, one is instructed to reflect on the inevitability and unpredictability of death; on the various, and variously painful ways, in which one could die; and finally, on the various stages of corpse decomposition. In a somewhat similar manner, and with a similar purpose, namely, that of overcoming the attachment to one’s body and sensual desires, reflections on repulsiveness are based on the contemplation of the 31 or 32 traditional body parts (from hairs and teeth, through the heart and spleen, to pus and faeces). Clearly, these two practices cannot be understood as being directly related to experience if the latter is construed in terms of ‘present phenomenal givens’; however, they can be, and are, directly related to experience if the latter is understood not only in terms of phenomenal actualities but also in terms of the general existential horizon, which includes—as one of its essential dimensions—temporality: everything that is has arisen and will pass away; everything that is is what it is due to innumerable enabling conditions, which are often overlooked. Additionally, it is not by merely observing, but by reflectively attending, that these dimensions of experience can be grasped.

5. Mindfulness as Radical Reflection: An Alternative Proposal

The last point made in the previous section could be expanded into a more general objection. That is, if we allow that normative and noetic qualities are integral to mindfulness, can we really claim that mindfulness is anchored in experience, and can we still maintain its distinction from other cognitive acts? This brings us to the key problem: what exactly do we mean by *experience*? I would like to argue that the objection above gains traction only because the received view operates with the conception of experience which is founded on a presupposition that needs to be discarded if we are to gain better insight into the traditional understanding of mindfulness. Put differently, the received view errs

not because it foregrounds experience, but because it operates with *too narrow a conception of experience*.

In the hope of making this point clearer, I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's (2002) explication of the 'phenomenal field' (*champ phénoménal*) and his critique of 'objective thought' (*pensée objective*). Let me start with an example. Say I choose to bring my gaze onto a given item in my perceptual field, e.g., a steaming mug of tea sitting near my computer screen. Now, for me to be able to do so, two things need to happen: a certain segment of the visual field has to 'stand out' as a *determinate figure* (the mug) while the rest of the visual field has to 'withdraw' into an *indeterminate background* (the surrounding): '[I]t is necessary to put the surrounding in abeyance the better to see the object, and to lose in background what one gains in focal figure' (ibid., p. 78). I can then, of course, decide to attend to a certain feature of the mug, say, its intricate color pattern, thereby making the pattern into a figure and the mug into a background; alternatively, I can shift my gaze to something else entirely, say, the computer screen, and allow the former figure—the mug with its intricate color pattern—to dissolve into the background. However, regardless of where I anchor my gaze, I cannot escape the *figure-ground structure*.

It is all too easy to overlook the immense importance of this seemingly trivial point. That is, I have to recognize that, as long as I remain within the bounds of my experience, *a thing is never solely a thing*, but always, and necessarily, a *some-thing* (in the Old English sense of *sum* as 'that which is out of': e.g., *sum feowra* as 'one [out] of four'). Put differently, for a (*some*)thing to appear, it must tear itself from *no-thing*, i.e., from that which it is not, yet which simultaneously determines what it is (and is therefore, as we will see, *not nothing*). What I am presented with (figure) has meaning for me in virtue of that which it is not (ground). The figure and ground are thus *internally related*: they are not two separate entities, but rather *two aspects of a meaningful whole*. There can be no figure without a ground and no ground without a figure: 'The object-horizon structure [. . .] is no obstacle to me when I want to see the object: for just as it is the means whereby objects are distinguished from each other, it is also the means whereby they are disclosed' (ibid., p. 79).

To make this somewhat less abstract, consider the following. When I look at the mug, I always get to see only one of its profiles or aspects, and yet I see it as a spatially extended thing; I can, of course, turn the mug around, so that new profiles present themselves to me, but I can never grasp them all at once. For profile A to be able to reveal itself, profiles B, C, etc., have to conceal themselves while simultaneously unveiling A as a profile of a larger 'thing-whole' (the mug), and not as a random 'snapshot' in a sequence of unrelated sense data. Note that I do not have to imagine or think about the concealed profiles; I can *see* the mug having other profiles than the one I am currently presented with. Therefore, 'to see a thing' means that an *actually present* profile appears against the background of *actually absent, but virtually co-present*, profiles: the thing, as phenomenological tradition puts it, is *adumbrated* in its profiles or aspects.

Now, what holds true for the 'inner' background of a thing—its adumbrative givenness—also holds true for its 'outer' background. When I rest my gaze on the mug, my previous visual 'anchors'—the computer screen, Buddha statue, etc.—withdraw into the background. As this happens, their mode of givenness—how they present themselves to me—changes; they are no longer given as determinate things with definite properties but recede into an indeterminate background with ambiguous properties. Put differently, upon withdrawing into the background, the identity and properties of things (their shape, color, etc.) cease to be determinate; yet, it is precisely this ambiguity of the horizon that determines the identity and properties of the thing that features as a figure in my visual field (the mug). Additionally, while this horizon, importantly, is *not a thing*, it is *neither a nothing*; instead, it is a *no-thing*, an indeterminate sphere of implicit meanings whose temporary equilibrium brings forth the explicit meaning of the thing I am attending to.

Crucially, then, in my experience, I am never confronted with individual items, but always with items against their inner and outer horizons. However, the story does not end here; at least two further points need to be elucidated. Firstly, the horizontality of my

experience should not be understood exclusively in *spatial*, but also, if not essentially, in *temporal* terms. The items that appear in my experience are not atemporal snapshots—‘point-like nows’—but ‘bleed into’ the immediate past (*retention*) and immediate future (*protention*). Let us look at an example. A melody is not a mere succession of individual notes; on the contrary, each segment of a melody, instead of being an isolated instance, always *retains* what has immediately preceded it and *protends* into what will immediately succeed it. I can understand the currently sounding note as a profile or an aspect of a common musical theme, only if the preceding and upcoming notes/profiles are not, as it were, divorced from it, but are virtually present as its past and future horizons. The *present*, to use the memorable phrase of William James, is always a *specious present*, an immediate impression surrounded by, and intertwined with, a halo of retentions and protentions. Thus, in addition to being given against a *spatial* (inner/outer) horizon, every experiential item is also given against a *temporal* (retentive/protentive) horizon.

Secondly, and relatedly, the spatio-temporal figure-ground structure of the perceptual field is not ‘simply there’, subsisting, as it were, in and of its own, but is indissolubly related to *myself* or—more precisely—to *my corporeal being*. My body is ‘the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure’ (ibid., p. 115). The term ‘body’ here does not stand for an agglomerate of tissues (ibid., p. 409), but rather to ‘my own body’ (*corps propre*), my experiential ‘zero point’ or ‘anchorage’ in the world. My body *as lived*—as given in experience—is a dynamic vehicle of my intentions and structures of behavior (ibid., pp. 128, 160, 406). Thus, what is given as a figure and a ground depends on how I am positioned in regard to the perceptual domain, and how I am positioned in regard to the perceptual domain depends on *how my body is geared onto the world*. For instance, if I move in a certain way—if I turn my eyes, tilt my head, etc.—what I see changes in a specific way: my attention shifts from the mug to the computer screen. That is to say, the formation and/or alteration of my bodily poise correspond to the formation and/or alteration of my perceptual field. However, the obverse holds true as well: when the perceptual field changes, new possibilities for my bodily engagement disclose themselves. Once I shift my gaze, the perceptual field presents me with new ‘solicitations’ and ‘obstacles’, which allow for the enactment of new behavioral patterns. My somato-motor intentions *polarize* my world, allowing for certain meaningful structures to manifest themselves; in turn, the meaningful structures of my world polarize my corporeal being, allowing for certain motoric melodies to unfold.

Note that it is precisely this co-implication between the somato-motor and perceptuo-sensual patterns that accounts for the ‘perceptual virtuality’ or the ‘horizontal nature’ of my experience: while the perceptual ‘figure’ (determinate thing) corresponds to the corporeal ‘figure’ (currently adopted somatic attitude), the perceptual ‘ground’ (indeterminate inner/outer horizon) corresponds to the corporeal ‘ground’ (possible somatic attitudes, i.e., possible manners of engagement with the environment). *Virtuality*, then, is not a mere fiction, but an ever-present halo of possibilities that surrounds the experienced actuality: an ineradicable openness and indeterminateness of my (re)synchronizations with the world.

This dynamic, and dynamically open, internal relation between the perceptual and the corporeal is what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘phenomenal field’ (ibid., pp. 62, 66, 69, 349, 425). The term ‘field’ is used to emphasize that my experience is not a mosaic of distinct items, but a dynamic unity, in which every aspect co-implies and co-determines every other aspect. Thus, in the phenomenal field, ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ poles are, as we have seen, not two separate domains, but are closely intertwined and engaged in ongoing synchronizations or ‘vital communication[s]’ (ibid., pp. 281, 398)—they are, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘two abstract ‘moments’ of a unique structure’ (ibid., p. 500).

Note that the vast majority of these synchronizations are not of my making but are the sedimented (retentive) echoes of my bio-evolutionary and socio-cultural past. I am, as Martin Heidegger (2008) famously put it, *thrown into the world*: I sleep, fear, and think, and I do so in specific culturally appropriate ways, yet without my knowing, at least originarily, of how and why I do these things. These dimensions of my being subtend

and transcend me: my *personal* life, consisting of my personal aims, projects, etc., is tacitly nourished by the current of *anonymous* (bio-cultural) existence. Already the simplest aspects of my vital being—breathing, digesting, etc.—are ways of synchronizing with the world, of patterning the phenomenal field. This, in turn, means that my personal existence is traversed by anonymous currents that predate me and that, in an important sense, delineate the contours of the (emotive, cognitive, etc.) environments I inhabit: even an arahant has to eat, defecate, and sleep. Additionally, yet while I cannot completely outrun these anonymous currents, I can, in my personal (protentive) acts, take them up and transform them: I can, for instance, structure my diet in order to minimally interfere with my other life goals or even choose to die of starvation.

Before we continue with our investigation, consider how different the notion of the phenomenal field is from the tacit understanding of experience that informs the received view. This tacit understanding is based on the notion of ‘sensations’ (ibid., p. 3)—also referred to as ‘sense data’ or ‘qualia’, whose role and significance in the domain of experience are roughly analogous to that of the physicist’s atom in the domain of the material world: it stands for the fundamental building block of our experience, a ‘psychological atom’ (ibid., p. 27). Thus, every-*thing* that presents itself to me in my perceptual field (a mug, melody, etc.) is said to ultimately consist of such ‘*raw feels*’ (qualities of redness, roundness, etc.), whereas the various *meanings* attached to these mosaics of sensations—what makes a given red-and-oval patch a ‘mug’ and not a ‘screen’—are classificatory contributions of the intellect. These meaningful attachments are not inherent in experience, but subsequent add-ons; they are the result of, say, a subsumption of an array of sensations under a common concept (or something of that nature).

However, if what we are primarily interested in is the *structure of experience*, this account cannot hold up. The main problem, of course, is that, in *my everyday experience*, I never find isolated qualities of redness, roundness, etc., but rather blood-red roses, oval-shaped tables, etc. Even if I adopt an analytic stance and deconstruct all my perceptions into atom-like sensations, they can only be recognized as such if given against a backdrop of meaningful unities (e.g., a certain thing given against a certain background). From the point of view of experience, such an analytic attitude is always secondary and does not provide me with the ‘fundamental constituents’ of the phenomenal field, but simply with one of its (wholesale) transformations.

However, if sensations, in this narrow sense, are not given in experience, then why do they feature so prominently in many accounts of experience? According to the phenomenological tradition, the answer lies in a deep-seated prejudice—a special *style of thinking*—which Merleau-Ponty refers to variously as ‘natural’ or ‘dogmatic attitude’ (ibid., p. 45), ‘prejudice (in favour) of the (objective) world’ (ibid., pp. 7, 62, 67), prejudice ‘arising from objective thinking’ (ibid., p. 373), or simply ‘objective thought’ (ibid., pp. 57, 82, 83). The common feature of this thought style is the conviction that, at the most fundamental level, reality consists of *discrete, determinate, and externally related things*, and that, since experience either (more popularly) *represents* or (less popularly) *constructs* reality, it too must, at the most fundamental level, consist of *discrete, determinate, and externally related thing-like entities*.¹⁷

The most characteristic feature of objective thought is that it puts *everything* it encounters on the Procrustean bed of ‘thinghood’, stretching and amputating phenomena that do not align with its preferred onto-epistemic standard. There is no room for the indeterminate, the field, or the gestalt-like; if one encounters such phenomena, they have to be decomposed into their constituent elements or discarded as epiphenomena, illusions, or errors. This is why, when objective thought is applied to experience, we end up with what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘experience error’: ‘[W]hat we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them.’ More simply: ‘We make perception out of things perceived’ (ibid., p. 5). Instead of trying to *get from objects to phenomena*, from things to the ‘cradle of things’ (ibid., p. 68), we *project objects onto phenomena*, missing the experience for the thing.

Sensations, sense data, etc., are therefore not the fundamental constituents of experience, but end results of the said Procrustean endeavor, whereby a given phenomenal content gets severed from the interrelatedness of the phenomenal field. The implications of this are wide ranging, for we have seen that the same thought style informs practically *all* aspects of the received view. This is seen in its taking for granted that, for instance, the Eightfold Path and the variegated account of suffering can be broken down into their constituents, which can then be employed individually or in novel contexts *without any qualitative alterations to their signification*. This analytic procedure, while useful (as amply attested to by the successes of modern science), can, if not handled properly, end up distorting the phenomena it tries to elucidate.

How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of objective thought and explore the richly interwoven fabric of the phenomenal field? According to Merleau-Ponty, what is needed is an *appropriate attitude*,¹⁸ which he calls ‘radical reflection’ (*réflexion radicale*) (Merleau-Ponty 2002) or ‘hyper-reflection’ (*surréflexion*) (Merleau-Ponty 1968). The idea of radical (hyper-)reflection is of particular interest to our inquiry as it meets the two criteria that, at the end of Section 3, have been outlined as essential for the distant, but grounded, investigation of lived experience. On the one hand, as a means of ‘breaking the spell’ which normally entrances our existence—the spell of objective thought—radical reflection requires that we ‘suspend’ or ‘put out of play’ our tacit acquiescence with the dynamics of life, not because we would want to negate it, but because, in our everyday engagements with the world, it is ‘taken for granted’ and ‘go[es] unnoticed’ (2002, p. xiv). In other words, what is required is a *reflective attitude*, an attitude that allows me to *thematize*, from a certain *remove*, what I normally *intimately live through*, i.e., to (re)capture the current of existence without becoming absorbed by, and dispersed in, the objects towards which it gravitates: ‘[O]ur existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and [thus] requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity’ (ibid., p. xvi).

On the other hand, this reflective remove must not forget its own origins in the pre-reflective current of existence; it must not become a conceptual fortress walled off from the existential wilderness. On the contrary, it must grasp itself *precisely as an attitude*—i.e., as yet another, even if qualitatively different, stance I can adopt towards myself and the world—and thus reflect not only on experience but also *on itself reflecting on experience*: ‘We must not only adopt a reflective attitude [. . .] but furthermore reflect on this reflection, understand the natural situation which it is conscious of succeeding, and which is therefore part of its definition.’ (ibid., p. 72) That is, to be complete, reflection must not exclude itself from its reflective grasp, but must, fundamentally, turn into a *reflexion*—a *reflection on life* which concomitantly apprehends itself as a *life of reflection* (Akiñcano 2019, p. 13; Ñāṇavīra Thera 2009, pp. 44, 78). As such, it must neither fuse with the experience nor step outside of it, but has to *position itself askew*, so to speak, whereby ‘it slackens [without severing!] the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. xv).

Thus, instead of the uneasy liaison with bare attention, I propose that the traditional Buddhist understanding of mindfulness aligns itself much more naturally with the notion of radical reflection (see Akiñcano 2019; Ñāṇamoli Thero 2014 for similar views). Correlatively, I believe that one of the main issues that has been plaguing the received view of mindfulness has to do with the fact that, because of its tacit adoption of objective thought, its conceptual resources leave no room for the middle ground between sensation and thinking. The attitude of radical reflection fills this conceptual gap: it is *neither* ‘contentization’, i.e., passive observation of experiential givens (pure sensations), *nor* ‘conceptualization’, i.e., active manipulation of mental constructs (abstract generalizations founded on various experiential invariables), but rather, and fundamentally, ‘contextualization’, i.e., reflective attention to the ‘birth of things’ in the intertwined texture of the phenomenal field (temporary structurations in the dynamic unfoldment of existence).

In this view, mindfulness is *both active and passive*: in order to thematize what is merely lived through, it must (actively) distance itself from what it tries to grasp; however, this removal never fully outruns that from which it tries to distance itself, for it embodies yet another modification of the anonymous current of existence into which it is (passively) thrown. Mindfulness as radical reflection thus allows for a sustained, open-ended inquiry into various dimensions of our existence without artificially divorcing itself from them. On the one hand, it allows for the cultivation of a reflexive ‘pause’ in our engagements with the world and thus enables us to identify, prevent, and remove those background factors that are constitutive of deep-rooted suffering (‘five hindrances’, *pañca nīvaraṇāni*) and identify, attain, and maintain those background factors that are constitutive of sustained well-being (‘seven factors of enlightenment’, *satta bojjhaṅgā*). However, as it does not fall prey to the illusion that it can magically disentangle itself from lived experience, it also takes on board that, for a certain *viewpoint* to become viable, it must transform itself into a *standpoint* and thus engulf *our whole being*. Put differently, such a reflective stance can be enacted only against a background of interrelated factors—e.g., against a mode of life that is conducive to cultivating virtue, concentration, and wisdom—whose *constellation* is a *sine qua non* for its *cultivation*. However, the practice of mindfulness itself then functions as a supporting factor for these other factors, thereby creating a *circulus fructuosus*, which results in a qualitatively new mode of being. This sheds light on the topic addressed in Section 2, namely, the close interrelatedness of mindfulness with the remaining seven factors of the Path, particularly those that tend to be neglected in contemporary approaches, e.g., the cultivation of virtue.¹⁹

In closing, I would like to highlight two things. First, we need to seriously reconsider the attempts to incorporate mindfulness into the Western milieu ‘on the cheap’. Mindfulness, as I have argued, is a thought-practice that acquires its true significance only in a specific context, and that context—if we use the broadest terms possible—is that of *philosophia* in the Hadotian sense, of seeking wise and virtuous ways of dealing with *la condition humaine*. While it is not, strictly speaking, necessary to couch this context in traditional Buddhist terms—as mentioned above, I am not arguing for the ‘traditionalist’ side of the fence—one should not neglect the fact that Buddhism *has* provided a tremendously rich and nuanced framework for engaging with such questions. Secondly, and relatedly, if the assertion that mindfulness is more akin to (radical) reflexion than to (mere) observation bears scrutiny, then the role it currently plays in the Western cultural context should be reconsidered as well. In the present climate, mindfulness is mostly treated as a relaxation-inducing and attention-enhancing technique; instead, I propose that it needs to be understood as a *unique noetic practice*, a unique mode of disciplined reflection, and should thus be put side by side with the other well-established and officially sanctioned modes of reflective inquiry. Thus, instead of being wedded (solely) to therapeutics, it is my contention that mindfulness is first and foremost a *philosophical* enterprise, one that, as the reader has hopefully noticed, the reflective approach adopted in this particular paper was not only referring to but hoping to enact.

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Abbreviations

MN	Majjhima Nikāya (2015)
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (2012)
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (2000)
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (2012)

Notes

- ¹ It is for this reason that I have tried to keep the references to the said debate and its historical background to the minimum. The interested reader is advised to consult my two former papers, mentioned in the body of the text, in which I provide an extensive overview of the relevant literature as well as the arguments of both sides.
- ² I will use this term throughout the paper to underscore the intimate interweaving of practical and theoretical aspects of Buddhist philosophy.
- ³ For some previous criticisms see, for instance, ([Gethin 2011](#); [Olendzki 2011](#); [Purser 2015a, 2015b](#)).
- ⁴ For some recent attempts see, for instance, ([Chiesa 2012](#); [Van Dam et al. 2018](#)).
- ⁵ Again, such general pronouncements are problematic in that they, by necessity, eschew the plurality of views usually held in a given discursive field; however, if handled with care, they can be useful as tentative intimations of ‘conceptual attractors’, towards which many, if not most, scholars within the field gravitate.
- ⁶ See, for instance, ([Lutz et al. 2007](#); [Davidson and Kaszniak 2015](#)) for a more nuanced approach to both meditation in general and mindfulness in particular.
- ⁷ See ([Thompson 2020](#), chp. 2; [Vörös 2016b](#), pp. 62–65), for a concise overview. See also ([McMahan 2008](#); [Gleig 2019](#)) for a more extensive treatment of the topic.
- ⁸ Of course, the very fact that one has to continually pay attention indicates that the notion of absolute passive receptivity is problematic, and calls for a conceptually coherent account as to how motivation and discrimination feed into what is ultimately supposed to be a passive process. The idea of ‘meta-cognition,’ which is sometimes used in these contexts, is on the right track, but if it is not spelled out in a non-mechanical way—i.e., in a way that ultimately takes recourse to the *attitudinal stance* of the meditator as a *person* (i.e., a person adopting a noetic stance towards his/her lived reality)—it remains open to the same objection.
- ⁹ All three principal ‘canons’ of Buddhist scripture (Pāli, Chinese, Tibetan) contain, to various extents, the early Buddhist material. While the preserved texts differ in some respects, the comparative analyses, at least of the Pāli and Chinese canons, have shown that their ‘doctrinal basis [. . .] is remarkably uniform; such variations as exist affect only the mode of expression or the arrangement of topics’. Further: ‘From their frequent references to and quotations from the Nikāyas/Āgamas, it is apparent that all subsequent Indian Buddhist thinkers of whatever school or persuasion, including the Mahāyāna [. . .] were completely familiar with this material and treated it as the authoritative word of the Buddha. When disagreements arose among Buddhists they did not concern the authority of the Nikāyas/Āgamas material, but certain points of its interpretation and the authority of other quite different material, namely the Mahāyāna’ ([Gethin 1998](#), p. 44).
- ¹⁰ I here completely forgo the question of how this ties in with subsequent developments in the Mahāyāna tradition; this is precisely one of the hermeneutic worms I am happy to leave, at least for now, wiggling in the can of cross-traditional comparative analysis.
- ¹¹ Traditionally, right mindfulness is depicted as the seventh factor of the Eightfold Path (after right effort (sixth place) and before right concentration (eighth place)).
- ¹² Since the Eightfold Path, as will be seen shortly, refers to *our existence as such*, it encompasses not only its present but also its past and future dimensions, for instance, by proposing ways of dealing with, rectifying, etc., past and preventing, overcoming, etc., future blunders.
- ¹³ I will address this issue in greater detail in the next section.
- ¹⁴ In the original sense of the ancient term *arete*, ‘excellence’: to live virtuously, then, is to adopt a mode of life dedicated to the cultivation of excellence (in all aspects of one’s being).
- ¹⁵ The common refrain, with minor alterations, is as follows: ‘There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate, bhikkhus, do not delay or else you will regret it later’ (MN 19, i 118).
- ¹⁶ As indicated, for instance, by the Buddha’s famous unwillingness to answer metaphysical questions about the ultimate nature of reality (MN 2, 63, 72).
- ¹⁷ The usual, if somewhat oversimplified, representationalist narrative (for reasons of space, I forgo the exposition of the opposite—constructivist—horn) goes as follows: my sense organs are mediately affected by external things—by, say, light particles bouncing off of a mug—and the resulting mosaic pattern of the point-like activations on the retina, which then gets transmitted via the optical nerve into the central nervous system, somehow corresponds to a mosaic pattern of point-like sense units (sensations of color, shape, etc.). Now, these sense units are never simply ‘given’, of course, as they are said to be sifted through a thick sieve of concepts and integrated into an array of elaborate ‘representations’; however, they can supposedly be found at the primary level of *undistorted* sensation—sensation freed from the trammel of concepts—and mindfulness, in the standard view, is said to

achieve precisely that. Note that this whole explanatory edifice is *not* built on experience, but on a certain *presupposition about what experience should look like*.

- 18 Not a ‘method’ or ‘technique’, but an ‘attitude’; not a set of clearly delineated steps that one can follow externally, i.e., without one’s thoroughgoing personal investment, but a *poise*, requiring—if implemented correctly—a wholesale (personal) transformation; not a procedure that is guaranteed to lead, ‘behind one’s back’, to the desired result, but a *mode of comportment* one needs to take up and reflectively cultivate.
- 19 Please note that the purpose of my paper was not to provide the full account of the Buddhist Path, especially its final soteriological goals. As such, it does not account for, say, ‘selflessness’ (*anattā*) or ‘blowing out’ (*nibbāna*), but merely lays the ground for a better understanding of mindfulness as a reflective attitude that allows for the attainment of these modes of (non)being. An extensive account would greatly transcend the scope of this inquiry, but I would like to point out that the idea of the phenomenal field, where the subjective and the objective aspects of the experience are co-constituted and are embedded into the larger horizon of the world, provides an intriguing starting point for further reflections on these topics.

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