

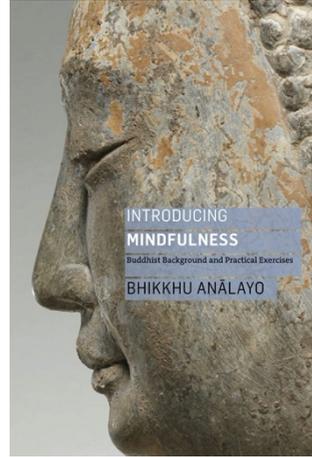
More Than An Introduction

Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Introducing Mindfulness: Buddhist Background and Practical Exercises*, Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2020, pb, 176pp

reviewed by Dharmacārī Ālokadhāra

Since the publication in 2003 of *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, a comprehensive commentary on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Bhikkhu Anālayo has become a prolific author of Dharma books and articles, particularly in the field of mindfulness. His first book was followed by *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (2013) in which he examined discourse parallels to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, particularly those that have been preserved in Chinese translation in the *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Ekottarika-āgama*. Then followed *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death* (2016), *A Meditator's Life of the Buddha Based on the Early Discourses* (2017), *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation: A Practice Guide* (2018), and *Mindfulness of Breathing* (2019), a practical guide to the sixteen stages taught by the Buddha in the *Anāpānasati Sutta*. These have all been published by Windhorse Publications. He has also had published, by the Barre Centre for Buddhist Studies, a book on *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies* (2017) and *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* (2019). (See the link below for a full listing of Bhikkhu Anālayo's publications). Windhorse Publications have now published two further books: *Introducing Mindfulness: Buddhist Background and Practical Exercises* and *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism: Characteristics and Functions*.

According to Anālayo, the two books had their origin in a retreat he taught with Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS). The retreat served as a basis for dialogue on the topics of disease and death between teachers of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and teachers or practitioners of traditional insight meditation. Anālayo subsequently felt that it would be beneficial to provide those involved in the current mindfulness movement with more detailed information on the nature and purposes of mindfulness in the early Buddhist tradition. *Introducing Mindfulness: Buddhist Background and Practical Exercises* is aimed at a more general readership and seeks to provide an accessible and practical approach to mindfulness, while *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism: Characteristics and Functions* 'has a more scholarly orientation', providing a comprehensive survey of the different aspects of



mindfulness in the early Buddhist tradition. This review is focused on *Introducing Mindfulness*.

Although a great admirer of Bhikkhu Anālayo and his works, given the number of books and articles that he has had published on the subject of mindfulness, I confess that I was initially a little doubtful as to whether the subject warranted two further books from the same author. However in reading *Introducing Mindfulness: Buddhist Background and Practical Exercises* I found myself once more drawn into his investigation of the area in terms of both the richness of the material and the new perspectives that he brings to what some might consider to be well-worn topics.

The references for this book include forty-eight of his own publications, the total number of which now exceeds three hundred and fifty. This helped me appreciate that each book published is the outcome of meticulous research, across all the strata of the preserved texts of early Buddhism, i.e. the *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon, the four Chinese *Āgamas*, and so on. The research is initially shared in academic articles, from which the books later emerge. From the scholarly perspective his work in this area is considered to be groundbreaking and of immense importance in helping to distinguish what was the quintessence of the Buddha's teaching from what were probably later additions. Consequently these publications represent the distillation of a huge amount of work by the author. As he is also a scholar-monk and practitioner, it is safe to assume that his books are also born from deep reflection and meditation on the material.

Introducing Mindfulness: Buddhist Background and Practical Exercises is a gift of a book. Like the ocean floor, it gradually shelves from the shallows to the depths, with discussion in later chapters on the development of ideas such as momentariness, the nature of mind and the bodhisattva ideal. The book begins however with some basic, but practical, aspects of how more recent applications of mindfulness such as dealing with overeating can actually be located in the teachings of the Buddha. It then covers some of the core aspects of mindfulness, which the author has dealt with in depth in some of his other books, such as its relationship to ethics, compassion, the body, health and death. With regard to death he very helpfully identifies two strategies of denial that we have a tendency to employ in order to shield ourselves from the reality of our own mortality. These are 'not me' and 'not now'. He introduces two meditations that can counteract the two strategies, which are an imaginative contemplation of a corpse in decay and reflecting, when doing mindful breathing, that each breath could be one's last.

Exploring the relationship of mindfulness to the development of wisdom, he is clear that for wisdom to arise there has to be collaboration of mindfulness with the qualities of diligence and clear knowing. He identifies these as distinct

qualities not intrinsic to mindfulness itself and indicates that it was a later development that mindfulness came to be seen as inherently involving discrimination and wisdom. Furthermore he is clear that the application of mindfulness with clear knowing involves the subtle use of concepts. This understanding differs from those of some later traditions, where the absence of concepts was seen as necessary for successful meditation. This links to an interesting discussion concerning the development of the notion that mindfulness should ‘plunge into an object’. This became the basis for the type of hard focused *jhānic* absorption found in the commentarial tradition as compared to the softer *jhānas*, inclusive of a wider breadth of experience, found in the *Nikāyas* themselves. Although this is an introductory book, there is even a discussion of the Buddha’s instruction to Bahiya of the Bark Garment. Here Anālayo touches upon the constructing nature of mind and how this might be countered through the use of ‘bare awareness’.

In the final three chapters of the book Anālayo presents a concise history of mindfulness and it is here that some of the most interesting perspectives are found. With reference to his discussions in chapters entitled ‘Mindfulness and the Abhidharma’ and ‘Non-Dual Mindfulness’, he clearly states that both ‘involve a considerable degree of simplification’ and are simply outlines which seek to introduce the reader to how particular interpretations and applications have impacted on the understanding of mindfulness in different Buddhist traditions.

In the chapter on ‘Mindfulness and the Abhidharma’ he attempts to trace the history of mindfulness from early Buddhism to modern-day insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and in doing so he touches on a number of doctrinal developments which had a significant effect on how the Buddha and his teaching was understood in some traditions. The first of these was the notion that the Buddha had been omniscient. Anālayo suggests that following the Buddha’s passing away, over a period of time, recollection of his extraordinary nature and abilities among some followers gradually resulted in his apotheosis and the belief that he had been omniscient. He states:

The ensuing shift in the conception of the nature of the Buddha transformed one who through awakening knew the nature of it all into one who knew all; it turned one who had seen through everything into one who had seen everything. (p.109)

He conjectures that a fundamental motivating factor behind the emergence of the various Abhidharma projects was the desire to provide a comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the Buddha’s teachings, such that the wisdom arising from his omniscience would not be lost to the world. He suggests that consequently the Abhidharma’s attempt to build a complete system from the

ad hoc teachings of the Buddha introduced a certain rigidity and formalism. By way of example he references the fourth foundation of mindfulness, contemplation of dharmas. Anālayo argues that through his comparative study of the *Nikāyas* of the Pāli Canon and the *Āgamas* it seems likely that the fourth foundation of mindfulness was initially simply the cultivation of the awakening factors rather than the whole litany of categories found in some recensions such as the *Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta*. He suggests that the insertion of these other categories reflected the influence of the Abhidharma project which shifted the meditative task ‘from simply being mindful of the condition of the mind to becoming aware of an increasingly larger inventory of details to satisfy doctrinal expectations’ (p.111).

The theory of ‘momentariness’, according to which things cease immediately after they have arisen, also emerged from the Abhidharma project. According to Anālayo:

This notion involves a radicalization of the early Buddhist teaching on impermanence, according to which phenomena can endure as changing processes for some period of time situated between their arising and their ceasing. (p.112)

This radicalization, he suggests, emphasises the observation of the cessation of phenomena during insight meditation, thereby leading to clearer insight into the other two *lakḥaṇas* and hence moving the mind towards liberation. Consequently he views the doctrine of momentariness as ‘a soteriological strategy and not an ontological statement that everything ceases immediately after having appeared’ (p.113). This approach led to ‘dry insight’ practices as found in modern day *vipassanā* approaches such as ‘noting’ in the Mahāsi tradition and the body scanning techniques promoted by Goenka. The aim of both is to lead to the insight knowledge of dissolution of mind and matter. It also highlighted the distinction that came to be made in the Abhidharma between *samatha* and *vipassanā*, a distinction that was not so distinctly drawn in the *Nikāyas*, where calming and purification of the mind through *jhāna* may be co-extensive with an all encompassing mindfulness, aware of whatever is arising through the six senses.

In the chapter on ‘Non-Dual Mindfulness’, Anālayo examines the emergence of the bodhisattva ideal, the ‘luminous Mind’ and the nature of mind. The bodhisattva ideal, he suggests, emerged from the practice of rejoicing in and exalting the Buddha, such that it fuelled, for some followers, the aspiration of embarking on the gradual progress over a series of lifetimes of awakening to Buddhahood.

He links the emerging bodhisattva ideal with the evolution of the idea that the nature of the mind is luminous, intrinsically pure and already awakened.

Whilst the early discourses recognized experiences of inner light that result from deepening concentration, over time a number of inferences led eventually to some traditions coming to regard the mind as being both intrinsically pure and awake. This results in a very different understanding of both the mind and awakening. Practice in these traditions moved from the early Buddhist emphasis on purification and cultivation of the mind to uncovering and becoming aware of the already awakened condition. Consequently practice became less about cultivation but rather the revelation of something inherent through the subsiding of mental activities. This led to an interesting inversion:

Whereas in early Buddhist thought cultivating the noble eightfold path is the cause for eventually reaching the goal, now the goal, as an already inherent quality of the mind, becomes the cause for the path of recognizing and enacting this goal. (p.124)

Anālayo is clear that the practice of ‘experiencing the mind as such’ emphasised in some later traditions, is also found to some extent in the teachings of early Buddhism. For example, by accessing the sphere of boundless consciousness the practitioner simply abides in the experience of mind without any subject/object distinction. He goes on to make the point that there is, however, ‘a significant difference’ in that the practices associated with early Buddhism were not about revealing any state of intrinsic purity or an inherently awakened mind but rather were useful meditative perspectives which could help the practitioner move to liberation. Indeed in the *Nikāyas* the Buddha exhorts his disciples to see even these exalted states as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

It is quite striking that although as a Theravādin monk he himself is rooted in the early Buddhist tradition he is quite even-handed in discussing these later developments and indeed acknowledges that traditions such as Dzogchen and Zen/Chán ‘offer powerful approaches to mental cultivation that can have a range of benefits’ (p.127), although he is clear that these approaches are ‘not the only possible way of cultivating mindfulness in order to realize the empty nature of the mind.’ (p.127)

In the book, Anālayo emphasises that with all developments in mindfulness, including more recent secular usage, the importance of ‘adopting a historical perspective by seeing their similarities and differences as a result of a gradual evolution’ (p.133), rather than identifying and holding steadfastly to one viewpoint about which is the ‘right one’. This is wise advice aimed at mitigating our tendency to alight upon and settle down with one viewpoint and cling tenaciously to it.

In the conclusion he considers the application of mindfulness to a range of areas in secular society, including climate change. His approach to the issue of climate change is an interesting one, contextualising our different responses in

terms of the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. He suggest climate change denial is rooted in the greed of the untrained mind, which just wants to continue enjoying the pleasures it has become accustomed to, without considering the consequences of what some of those pleasures entail. Confronted with climate change denial some of us respond with anger. He suggests that this response is again rooted in the defilements and is not a solution, which will only be found through a clear comprehension of the situation allied with the cultivation of the perspective on non-harming. The third response is one of resignation which arises from feelings of overwhelm and impotence. This he suggests is based in delusion and fails to clearly comprehend that societies are made up of individuals and that action on the individual level when carried out by many can have a positive impact. It is likely that some of Anālayo's reflections here will be found in more depth and detail in *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*, his book published last year.

Introducing Mindfulness is well set out and each chapter has an introduction, the main body of the text and a conclusion. This facilitates assimilation of the material under discussion which is then re-enforced by way of practical exercises which encourage the reader to incorporate mindfulness into their daily lives rather than just being something that is practised on the cushion. I found reading the book was an interesting and enriching experience and brought to my attention how some teachings rooted in early Buddhism evolved and developed, often leading to quite different perspectives and understandings including about the nature of the path and the goal.

Anālayo states in the introduction to *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism: Characteristics and Functions*, that it was proclaimed in one of the discourses that the Buddha 'would have been able to give uninterrupted teachings on the cultivation of mindfulness for even a hundred years without running out of material' (p.26). Consequently, I suspect that these two new books will not be Anālayo's last on the subject of mindfulness.

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Anālayo's complete publications:

<https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/resources/offerings-analayo/publications/>

Windhorse Publications:

<https://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/introducing-mindfulness-paperback/>