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ORIGINAL PAPER

Mindfulness Meditation and the Meaning of Life

Oren Hanner[1,2]

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Abstract
Throughout the history of philosophy, ethics has often been a source of guidance on how to live a meaningful life. Accordingly, when the ethical foundations of mindfulness are considered, an important question arises concerning the role of meditation in providing meaning. The present article proposes a new theoretical route for understanding the links between mindfulness meditation and meaningfulness by employing the terminology of Susan Wolf's contemporary philosophical account of a meaningful life. It opens by examining the question of what kinds of life-meanings are made available by Buddhist doctrine, considering the two alternatives of a cosmic, human-independent meaning of life versus the subjective meanings that humans give to their individual lives. After surveying current psychological theories that aim to explain the correlation between mindfulness as a trait and meaning in life, all of which see mindfulness as a mediating factor in the production of meaning, I argue that Wolf's framework offers a promising theoretical basis for clarifying the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in that it explains why mindfulness has a direct bearing on meaning in life. I then show that mindfulness meditation, as understood in Buddhism, can respond to some of the philosophical worries that arise from Wolf's theory, specifically her concern with the standards for securing the objective value of meaningful activities and projects. My claim is that mindfulness meditation is representative of a broader class of activities that are non-subjectively valuable insofar as they are required for any exploration of objective meaning or standards of values, as well as for engagement in objectively valuable projects and activities.

Keywords Authenticity · Buddhism · Ethics · Meaningfulness · Meaning in life · Meditation · Mindfulness · Mindfulness-to-meaning theory · Objectivism · Pali Canon · Reappraisal · Self-determination theory · Susan Wolf · Value · Vipassana

In the broadest sense of ethics, traditionally understood in philosophy as the area that inquires how one should live one's life, reflecting on the ethical foundations of mindfulness would lead us to consider a wide range of issues. Besides meditation's immediate connection to moral conduct and wholesome mental states, the ethical dimension of mindfulness bears relevance to theoretical and practical questions relating, for example, to the meaning of life, that are not discussed in these terms in classical Buddhist sources, but have garnered attention in modern and contemporary conversations on Buddhism and meditation. Answers to the question of how to live a meaningful life vary considerably, ranging from pursuing pleasurable experiences to following religious injunctions to creating one's own subjective meaning (Klemke, 2017, p. 3). When ethics is considered from this perspective, the link between mindfulness and ethics translates into the relations between mindfulness and meaning, which will be understood in the present article as the dimension of life that provides one with a purpose, makes one's life significant, and consequently, makes life worth living. One of the main questions that arises in this light is whether mindfulness meditation can be responsible for providing meaning to life, and if so, in what way. This question reverses the causal order that is traditionally ascribed to the relationship between ethics and mindfulness in Buddhism, which sees ethics as a practice that comes before and enables the establishment of mindfulness (Buddhaghosa, 2011, pp. 7–8, 1.7–8). Instead, it turns the spotlight to a different hierarchy within which mindfulness provides insights into how we ought to act and live our lives and also into what makes our lives worth living.

Answers to this question have recently been offered by theoretical work in psychology (Allan et al., 2015; Chu & Mak,

✉ Oren Hanner
oren.hanner@dukekunshan.edu.cn

[1] Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, University of Hamburg, Alsterterrasse 1, 20354 Hamburg, Germany

[2] Duke Kunshan University, No. 8 Duke Avenue, Kunshan 215316, Jiangsu, China

2020; Garland et al., 2015). Classifying mindfulness as a trait, these studies suggest that possessing it generates certain other states or behaviors that in turn contribute to meaning in life. In other words, mindfulness is indirectly involved in the production of meaning. Against these accounts, in what follows I will propose an alternative way to understand the link between the two elements of mindfulness and meaning. On the view that I will defend, mindfulness plays a central and unmediated role in making a life meaningful. To clarify the way in which I believe that mindfulness is causally related to meaning, I will turn to some recent philosophical analysis of meaningfulness by Wolf (1997, 2007, 2010), which is the culmination of her attempts to identify the conditions for a meaningful life. Considering the practice of mindfulness from this perspective, I will suggest, can explain the reasons why it enriches and indeed gives meaning to the lives of those who engage in this practice. Importantly, as part of this move, I will shift the focus from regarding mindfulness as a trait to viewing it as (1) an activity and (2) the mental state that this activity yields.

My other goal in this article is to address a philosophical concern that troubles Wolf's theory: the difficulty in determining which activities and projects are *objectively* valuable (rather than merely *subjectively* fulfilling). The objective value that Wolf attempts to define signifies the independent worth of an activity or project which distinguishes it from others that may provide a subjective good feeling, but that we would judge to be trifling. Here, I believe that mindfulness as an activity can pave the path to one answer. As a meaning-provider, it consists of a mental state that acts as a cognitive requirement for engaging in any objectively valuable project or activity. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation is an activity that facilitates meaning in itself. I will suggest that by virtue of these characteristics, mindfulness represents a class of activities that are objectively valuable owing to their role in enabling meaningfulness. My discussion, then, will draw on ideas from various disciplines—philosophy, psychology, Buddhist studies, and ethnography—but in all these instances, I am interested in the theoretical rather than empirical implications of these viewpoints.

To prepare the ground for the discussion, however, I will start by raising a preliminary question regarding the kinds of life-meanings that are available in Buddhist thought. Although my discussion will acknowledge that Buddhism provides cosmic notions of the meaning *of* life, my philosophical treatment of the relationship between mindfulness and meaningfulness will rather lean towards the conception of Buddhist doctrine as enabling human-made meanings *in* life.

Which Meaning?

Philosophers distinguish between two senses of life's meaning. The first has in view the purpose of the cosmos and our existence within it, while the second concerns the personal meaning that we give to our individual lives (Belshaw, 2021, pp. 160–170; Benatar, 2017, pp. 21–23; Edwards, 2017, pp. 118–120; Metz, 2013, p. 3; Seachris, 2013, pp. 3–4). To clarify, the first kind of meaning is the ultimate purpose of human life, a notion that considers humans to be part of a higher purpose or plan of a teleological universe. This meaning is independent of us humans and our human subjectivity, and, as such, underlies the life purpose of every person equally. Due to its universal, human-independent assumption, this sense can be described as "the meaning *of* life." As Seachris (2013) notes, this kind of meaningfulness responds to the basic question: "What is it all about?" Elaborating further, he adds that "there is a profound human impulse to seek a deep explanation, context, or narrative through which to interpret existence, and then to move beyond localized foci by *living into* this universal, totalizing narrative"; the questions that concern this sense of meaningfulness highlight "the cosmic or global dimension of the question of life's meaning, whereby some sort of explanation (perhaps even *narrative* explanation) is sought that will render the universe and our lives within it intelligible" (p. 3; emphasis in original).

In many respects, Buddhism's metaphysical worldview provides its believers with the first kind of meaning. Ethnographic studies conducted in Buddhist Asia (Eberhardt, 2006; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Spiro, 1982) testify to the fact that Buddhism is a source of cosmic meaning for its followers. Writing about twentieth-century Sri Lanka, for instance, Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) note that "in most societies religion performs several functions. As a soteriology, it provides life with meaning and a sense of purpose; that is the function of Buddhism in Sinhala society" (p. 22). Buddhist cosmology acknowledges the existence of multiple forms of life, including gods and demons, and various metaphysical laws that govern the life conditions, experiences, and trajectories of human beings. The mutually complementary ethico-metaphysical theories of *karman* and rebirth—the understanding that one's virtuous and non-virtuous actions determine the nature of one's future existence and experiences—as well as the principles of spiritual merit accumulation and transfer are representative of this function of Buddhism. Through these doctrines, Buddhism provides a solution to the "problem of evil" and offers guidance as to how one should live one's life (17–18).

Spiro's classic account of "Kammatic Buddhism" in Myanmar, although later called into question by scholars such as Keown (1992, pp. 85–87) and others, aptly illustrates the purpose that this worldview gives to the lives of Buddhist practitioners by offering them religious aspirations to pursue:

> Buddhism for most Buddhists is a means not so much for the extinction of desire as for its satisfaction; not

> so much for the cessation of rebirth as for a better rebirth; not so much for some kind of absolute Deliverance—whether this be conceived as the extinction of being or, less extremely, of an individualized ego—as for the persistence of the individuated ego in a state of sensate happiness. (Spiro, 1982, p. 67)

The findings of Spiro's interviews indicate that for the majority of lay Buddhists in Myanmar, the understanding of the Buddhist worldview generates the motivation to achieve physical pleasure through good rebirths (for example, as a rich person or a god; pp. 80–82). A similar Buddhist cosmological framework gives meaning to the lives and deaths of Shan villagers in northern Thailand (Eberhardt, 2006, pp. 48–52) and shapes their identities and aspirations (pp. 171–172).

At the same time, from a doctrinal point of view, various elements in the Buddhist vision of the human condition call into question the view that our existence within the cosmos, by which I will understand the cycle of births and deaths (*saṃsāra*), is ultimately meaningful at all. Rather, they treat it as tedious, pointless, and fundamentally undesirable. It is ateleological, not showing any sign of design or purpose. Since in itself it does not provide any higher plan of which humans can be part, the universe falls short of the basic expectations for any source of sustainable life-meaning of the ultimate sort. In their study of contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Gombrich and Obeyesekere add that although Buddhist cosmology explains the moral order and the natural order of the world as described above, it also acknowledges the essential meaninglessness of the universe as it is understood in classical India. "Sinhala Buddhism," they write, "has inherited [the] classical Indian cosmology and added only minor local modifications. Thus,... it holds that the world is devoid of religious value or significance; it is mere uncreated space, without beginning or end in time" (1989, p. 17). In a similar vein, Spiro reminds us that the ideology of "Nibbanic Buddhism"—that strand of Burmese Buddhism that aspires to the attainment of self-liberation (*nirvāṇa*) from the cycle of births and deaths—is antagonistic to the cosmos, its order, and any purpose it may provide. In Spiro's words, "it rejects everything within the spatiotemporal world (*saṃsāra*) as a possible goal of salvation... and it demands the renunciation of... the sociocultural world as the arena within which one can best strive for the attainment of salvation" (1982, p. 66).

Therefore, I find that there is plausibility to the alternative view, which sees Buddhist doctrine as primarily allowing for the second type of meaningfulness, which is that of meaning *in* life. This notion concerns the meaning that we confer on our lives, even though it is not independently embedded in the universe. Due to its individualistic nature, this second sense of meaningfulness allows for a plurality of meanings. As Seachris writes, meanings of the second type highlight

> the *individualist* or *local* dimension of the meaning-of-life question. This dimension is more overtly *normative* than is the cosmic dimension. When asking questions within this dimension, we are more concerned with the aim of securing a *meaningful life*. We wonder what we must, or should, or ought to order our lives around so as to render them meaningful. (2013, p. 4; emphasis in original)

The sort of existential crisis that is commonly associated with a search for meaning often evokes the first notion, the ultimate meaning *of* human life—a single, absolute, eternal purpose that gives a clear sense of direction to every human being. Tolstoy's (1904) rich description of his sought-for meaning outlines its defining characteristics, both psychological and metaphysical. His rift was one of losing the motivation to act; a quest for a fundamental principle that would provide the reason for doing anything at all. "Five years ago, something very strange began to happen with me," he writes, "I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected.... These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: 'Why? Well, and then?'" (p. 16). And he adds, "So long as I did not know why, I could not do anything. I could not live" (p. 17).

The source of his meaninglessness, he then realizes, is his finitude, the fact that his life will end and his endeavors in it will leave no trace. "Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me," he writes, "and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things?" (p. 21). Thus, he believes that the fundamental principle that would provide the answer must have an eternal status. "The question was, 'Why should I live?' that is, 'What real, indestructible essence will come from my phantasmal, destructible life? What meaning has my finite existence in this infinite world?'... [M]y question, no matter how simple it appeared in the beginning, included the necessity of explaining the finite through the infinite, and vice versa" (p. 51). Tolstoy's meaning, then, is independent of us finite humans and can only be provided by an eternal source. For him, the answer was Christian faith in God. But does the Buddhist path offer a similar notion of the ultimate meaning *of* life? That is, does Buddhism consider life to be meaningful at all in the first sense discussed above?

As the second notion of meaningfulness is more in consonance with the conversations in Western philosophy and psychological research that I will engage and the experiences of contemporary mindfulness practitioners that I will explore, I

want to highlight a number of threads running through early Buddhist doctrine that lend support to the view that Buddhism allows for meanings *in* life, but less so for meaning in its ultimate, cosmic sense. (Note, again, that the discourses that this paper engages are modern and that classical Buddhist sources do not overtly consider the questions about meaningfulness that they raise). One reason to believe that human life cannot find the latter kind of meaning in Buddhist teachings is that, for Buddhism, life in the cycle of births and deaths is a form of existence that ought to be transcended. The end of the Buddhist path is to escape it, or, in the case of the Mahāyāna tradition, to work towards liberating oneself and others from it. Observing the suffering and dissatisfaction of cyclic existence, the practitioner ought to develop a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) about attaining liberation from it. The *Sutta Collection* (*Suttanipāta*) narrates the arising of this attitude in the Buddha's mind in the following words:

> I will tell you of my sense of urgency, how I was stirred by a sense of urgency. Having seen the population trembling like fish in a pool with little water, having seen them hostile to one another, fear came upon me. The world was insubstantial all around; all the directions were in turmoil. Desiring an abode for myself, I did not see [any place] unoccupied. Having seen those hostile at the end, discontent came upon me. Then I saw the dart here, hard to see, nestled in the heart. When one is struck by that dart one runs astray in all directions. But having drawn out that dart, one does not run, does not sink. There the trainings are recited: "Whatever bonds there are in the world, one should not be intent on them. Having entirely pierced through sensual pleasures, one should train for one's own nibbāna." (*Suttanipāta* 4.15; Bodhi, 2017, p. 315)

Why, then, do we nevertheless remain in *saṃsāra*? According to the Buddha, as described in the *Connected Discourses* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*), dwelling in the cyclic world of unawakened delusion is triggered by the deeply ingrained thirst for existence and its opposite, non-existence (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 56.11; Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1843–1847), and quite often motivated by the gratification that one obtains from sensual pleasures. However, this gratification is outweighed by the amount of danger involved in pursuing pleasure, leading the Buddha to prescribe the practices for escaping the gratification and the danger altogether by abandoning desire and lust for anything that belongs to the *saṃsāric* experience (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.26–22.28; Bodhi, 2000, pp. 873–875).

Since *saṃsāric* existence is a state to be ceased in the first place, it cannot be a source of ultimate meaning, one that would be desirable and able to give purpose to our lives, and this clearly defeats the concept of meaningfulness in life. At the same time, the goals of self-liberation (*nirvāṇa*), full awakening (*bodhi*), and the realization of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*), which could constitute a global meaning of life, are all principles that transcend the impermanence and finitude of *saṃsāric* existence. By this very fact, these ideas do not answer the basic question of the meaning of life: "What is it—life in the cycle of births and deaths—all about?" If there is any purpose or plan that the universal order "offers" humans, it is merely negative: break free from the universe in which you presently reside. Nevertheless, these ideas can serve as ideals around which we can order our lives so as to render them meaningful. In other words, aspiring to achieve them can undergird the localized meaning, a meaning *in* life, that we bestow upon our personal lives.

Second, the Buddhist tradition considers our existence in the cycle of births and deaths to be pointlessly repetitive, not achieving any linear progress, but instead leading to recurring experiences of dissatisfaction and suffering. The Buddha voices this understanding using a formula that recurs throughout the *Connected Discourses*:

> Bhikkhus, this saṃsāra is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time, bhikkhus, you have experienced suffering, anguish, and disaster, and swelled the cemetery. It is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them. (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.1; Bodhi, 2000, p. 651)

Our tedious stream of existence in the cycle of births and deaths is meaningless and prosaic, as can be concluded from the Buddha's choice to liken it to a stick that falls again and again, each time landing on a different edge:

> Just as a stick thrown up into the air falls now on its bottom, now on its side, and now on its top, so too as beings roam and wander on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, now they go from this world to the other world, now they come from the other world to this world. (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.9; Bodhi, 2000, p. 656)

Furthermore, the experiences of dissatisfaction and pain that we have undergone over the course of these innumerable forms of existence are similarly repetitive. We have shed many tears as we have experienced "the death of a mother... the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter" (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.3; Bodhi, 2000, p. 653); we have shed streams of blood as we have been beheaded as "buffalo, sheep, goats, deer, chickens, and pigs... [after having been] arrested as burglars, highwaymen, and adulterers" (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.3; Bodhi, 2000, p. 659); and "whenever you see anyone in misfortune, in misery, you

can conclude: 'We too have experienced the same thing in this long course'" (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.11; Bodhi, 2000, pp. 657–658). Interestingly, the Buddha reminds us that happiness, too, is just as mundane an event: "Whenever you see anyone happy and fortunate, you can conclude: 'We too have experienced the same thing in this long course'" (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 15.12; Bodhi, 2000, p. 658). The universe that we inhabit, then, is cyclic, repetitive, and futile. It has no intrinsic purpose, and therefore, it cannot provide any absolute meaning to life.

Finally, there are good reasons to believe that the very search for a universal meaning is in opposition to the Buddhist path as envisaged by the Buddha. The kind of questions one asks when one attempts to make the universe intelligible would very likely fall into the class of "unanswered questions," the metaphysical puzzles that the Buddha refused to unravel and rejected on the grounds that contemplating them is not conducive to liberation from suffering. In what is probably the most referenced instance of this approach in modern scholarship, Māluṅkyāputta, one of the Buddha's disciples, asks him various metaphysical questions: whether the world is eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite, whether the soul is the same as the body or whether the two are different from each other, whether or not the Buddha exists after death, and so forth. The Buddha refuses to answer these questions and explains to Māluṅkyāputta that he had left the answers undeclared "because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna" (*Majjhima Nikāya* 63; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005, p. 536; for a criticism of this interpretation, according to which the Buddha endorses a robust metaphysical position regarding these questions, compare Shulman, 2014, pp. 63–76).

The three considerations above support the stance that pursuing the meaning of life in the first sense—a universal meaning that stems from the purpose of our existence within the world—is at least in some respects incompatible with the basic approach of Buddhist teachings towards the nature of cyclic existence and the knowledge that we can legitimately hope to gain about it. However, Buddhist teachings can be seen to provide a plethora of principles and ideals that can contribute to the second type of meaning; that is, meaningfulness in life. This observation defines the outlines of my discussion of mindfulness in the following pages, which will focus on its relationship to meaning *in* life rather than the meaning *of* life.

On the Relationship between Mindfulness and Meaning in Life

Although the Buddhist understanding of life's meaning has been the subject of several philosophically oriented studies (Batchelor, 1983; Kalmanson, 2020; Loy, 2018), in recent years, some of the most developed theoretical work on the relationship between mindfulness and meaningfulness has come from psychological research. Before advancing my own understanding of this relationship, I will offer a short survey of the current landscape, particularly highlighting the tendency in the literature to consider mindfulness as a trait that only indirectly contributes to meaning.

Chu and Mak's (2020) study is a meta-analysis of the correlational relationship between mindfulness-based interventions and meaningfulness. They note that such interventions have been widely applied in order to reduce physical and psychological distress, but that it is equally important to investigate whether, and how, mindfulness might enhance people's psychological well-being, one important dimension of which is a sense of meaning in life. Their question, then, is whether mindfulness-based interventions could advance meaningfulness. In the theoretical part of their study, they point out that "conceptually, how mindfulness may contribute to meaning in life is lacking" (p. 178). To begin this conceptualization, they follow a notion of meaningfulness that has been proposed in psychological literature (Martela & Steger, 2016), seeing it as a trait that has three dimensions. The first is coherence: namely, meaning in life relies on the ability to make the entirety of one's life coherent and comprehensible. It is through perceiving the comprehensiveness of one's life that one is able to feel that one's life makes sense, which is a condition for finding meaning. A second dimension is purpose, which they define, following Martela and Steger (2016), as the "sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life" (Chu & Mak, 2020, p. 178). Finally, the third dimension is significance: the sense that life has inherent value and that one has a life that is worth living. Together, these three dimensions constitute a sense of meaning in life.

Departing from this notion of meaningfulness and drawing on empirical studies, Chu and Mak attempt to explain the links between possessing mindfulness and experiencing life as meaningful. They suggest that three mechanisms could be responsible for the causal relationship between the two variables. One explanation appeals to the mechanism of "decentering," a factor that mediates mindfulness and purpose. Decentering is "the ability to observe one's thoughts and feelings as temporary, objective events in the mind, as opposed to reflections of the self that are necessarily true" (p. 188; a definition that they borrow from Fresco et al., 2007). The suggestion is that people who possess the capacity to consider their internal and external experiences objectively are capable of personal growth and that the ensuing shift in perspective allows them to see more clearly who they really are. According to this explanation, the ability not to identify with one's thoughts leads to greater clarity about oneself, which gives rise to a sense of purpose, and thereby, meaning in life.

Self-awareness that is achieved through mindfulness is also associated with authenticity, which is the second mechanism considered by Chu and Mak. In this context, authenticity is "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 189; a definition adopted from Kernis & Goldman, 2006), and includes such factors as being in touch with one's motives and desires and being aware when one is not being one's true-self. Setting aside questions about how this mechanism ties in with mindfulness of the sort that acknowledges the *non-existence* of a core- or true-self, the idea is that the more authentic we are—the more we can identify our goals, values, and beliefs—the more we are aware of our purpose and are able to direct our lives to valued futures. The ability to follow and pursue our purpose in life is a component of meaningfulness. In the second mechanism, mindfulness is the factor that enables the self-knowledge that sets off this process.

The third mechanism that could explain how mindfulness contributes to meaning in life is attending to positive elements in one's environment. According to Chu and Mak, mindfulness gives rise to the disposition to pay attention to positive experiences and, following that, to the inclination to undertake a positive reappraisal of one's experiences. These two tendencies lead to positive affect, which is a predictor of a sense of meaning in life. Although the authors do not state which of the three components of meaningfulness is advanced by positive affect, it seems plausible to assume that positive experiences are linked to the third dimension, the sense that our lives matter and are worthwhile.

Chu and Mak consider these three mechanisms to be compelling accounts of the relationship between mindfulness-intervention practices and meaning in life. However, they point out two additional routes that may constitute alternative explanations for how mindfulness promotes meaning in life and that are also more closely related to Buddhist doctrine (p. 190). Non-attachment, the attitude of not being fixated on ideas, objects, and so on, or wishing to own or control them, is one of these mechanisms. According to this hypothesis, mindfulness leads the practitioner to realize that the achievement of goals depends on many factors, that life and phenomena are impermanent, and that one should focus on the present moment. As a result of cultivating non-attachment in this way, the practitioner may experience less of the suffering that arises from frustrated goals and may reorient his goals and desires, which could contribute to a feeling of meaning in life. As a second mechanism, Chu and Mak lump together various principles belonging to the Buddhist path that may be adopted by a practitioner of mindfulness—such as moral conduct, the Buddhist understanding of reality (wisdom), and meditative practices other than mindfulness—speculating that these elements could lead to a greater sense of meaning in life. In all of these mechanisms, mindfulness is seen as a practice that is only indirectly responsible for finding meaning in life, being mediated by other factors, such as attending to positive experiences or non-attachment, that are more closely related to a sense of meaningfulness.

Chu and Mak's study alludes to two other works in empirical psychology that theorize the relationship between mindfulness and meaningfulness in this way. Allan et al. (2015) elaborate on the function of authenticity as a mediating factor that enables a meaningful life. Their definition of meaning in life is somewhat narrower: it is "the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (p. 996). Although this definition may tacitly presuppose the first two pillars of Chu and Mak's notion of meaningfulness—coherence and purpose—its emphasis is on significance, the third pillar. To explain the role of mindfulness in generating a sense of meaningfulness understood in these terms, Allan et al. turn to the self-determination theory and propose that mindfulness may lead to greater authenticity, which in turn leads to increased meaning in life.

According to the self-determination theory, meaning in life manifests when people have a healthy integration of the self. This trait is exhibited by "engagement with the world in a way that is consistent with one's own values and beliefs and that is internally rather than externally motivated" (p. 996). Such an integration of the self, alongside an engagement with life that is self-consistent, generates a sense of purpose. The theory maintains that in order to gain more meaning through increasingly higher levels of self-integration, people must become self-aware. In this regard, mindfulness, which enables an open, non-judgmental awareness, contributes to higher levels of self-knowledge and the associated sense of meaningfulness. Another way that Allan et al. frame this process is by suggesting that the non-defensive and open attitude shown by those who practice mindfulness is essential for a clear assessment of the beliefs, behaviors, and values that should be integrated into the self (p. 997). The ensuing authenticity, understood as a combination of four components—awareness of one's internal states; unbiased processing of positive and negative aspects of the self; behavior that corresponds to one's own values, needs, and desires; and relational orientation, that is, an honest and revealing approach in interpersonal relationships—enables one to lead a life that is more meaningful.

Finally, Garland et al. (2015) concentrate, in a similar vein, on the role of positive reappraisal in creating meaningfulness and take what they designate the "mindfulness-to-meaning theory" to be a fruitful framework for understanding the relationship between mindfulness and the meaning of life events. Rather than throwing light on how mindfulness promotes the meaning of life as a unified existence, then, the mindfulness-to-meaning theory seeks to explain the cognitive mechanism through which meaning is given to specific experiences (which may then contribute to the

significance of life as a whole). The theory places the idea of meaning in relation to *eudaimonic* well-being, which the authors describe as being "characterized by a sense of purpose and meaningful, positive engagement with life that arises when one's life activities are congruent with deeply held values even under conditions of adversity" and contrast with hedonic approaches to happiness, which "depend on obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain" (Garland et al., 2015, p. 294). Their notion of meaningfulness, therefore, refers to experiences of *eudaimonic* meaning stemming from responses to life events that align with one's core values.

The question now is this: How does mindfulness training foster *eudaimonic* responses that engender a sense of meaningfulness in life? According to the theory, mindfulness practice "evokes a metacognitive state that transforms how one attends to experience" (Garland et al., 2015, p. 295). By transforming the way in which one approaches life events, this metacognitive state promotes positive reappraisal, which involves "broadening the scope of appraisal to appreciate that even aversive experiences are potential vehicles for personal transformation and growth" (Garland et al., 2015, p. 295). In other words, the cognitive process delineated by the mindfulness-to-meaning theory imbues experiences of hardship that seem pointless with new meanings. Within this theory, mindfulness has the crucial role of creating a mental space between an initial cognitive appraisal of an event and the conditioned responses that typically follow from it. By enabling clear comprehension of life experiences and helping to sever the automatic link between the appraisal and the responses that immediately ensue, mindfulness allows for reappraisal to take place (Garland et al., 2015, p. 309). Similar to the approach of Allan et al., it appears that the mindfulness-to-meaning theory is mostly interested in the significance component of meaningfulness, where the effects of positive reappraisal manifest in making life seem more valued and worth living; however, being *eudaimonic* in nature, it also provides a sense of purpose, according to the definition of Garland et al. (2015).

One difficulty faced by this theory, which requires further explanation, according to the authors, is that in present-day scholarship on mindfulness interventions, mindfulness is understood as a non-discursive, non-judgmental awareness that decreases semantic-evaluative processes, whereas the mindfulness-to-meaning theory relies heavily on an understanding of mindfulness as involving a central cognitive, evaluative factor. The authors do not resolve this issue, but argue that the emphasis on the non-conceptual and non-judgmental aspects of mindfulness "may obscure its broader purpose of engendering eudaimonic meaning" (Garland et al., 2015, p. 294).

The three analyses above share the notion that mindfulness is a trait, and, more importantly, a trait that plays only an indirect role in the production of meaningfulness. Mindfulness meditation, that is, gives rise to other factors, and it is these factors that are responsible for meaning in life. According to the view that I wish to defend, however, mindfulness can be seen as an immediate component of meaningfulness. On this view, rather than being constrained to a psychological trait, mindfulness meditation is an activity, and even a life project, that intrinsically involves a subjective sense of fulfillment (state mindfulness) alongside an objective value (in a sense to be clarified below), both of which are conditions for a meaningful life. Of course, mindfulness meditation cultivates the corresponding trait, but on the interpretation that I will support, it is not limited to it. Mindfulness is also a practice that evokes a corresponding mental state, and as Kiken et al. (2015) show, state mindfulness and trait mindfulness are closely linked, in that an increase in the former through mindfulness-based interventions is correlated with an increase in the latter (p. 45).

Mindfulness as a Meaningful Activity

What makes a life meaningful? The answer given by the aforementioned theories is that a meaningful life depends on the possession of various psychological elements: perceiving one's life to be coherent, having a sense of purpose, seeing one's life as significant, a healthy integration of the self, authenticity, positive reappraisals of life events, and so on. Asking this same question, Wolf (1997, 2007, 2010) seeks to identify the necessary conditions for a life to be meaningful, but approaches the topic from a philosophical standpoint. The conditions that she distills, I believe, aptly capture the aspects of mindfulness meditation that make it so clearly, and not only indirectly, a contributing factor to a meaningful life.

Wolf begins her inquiry by noting that while philosophers often recognize two types of motivations and practical reasons to act—self-interest and morality—meaningfulness is a need that reveals a third type of motivation and practical reason that moves us to do things. When we act out of self-interest, our actions are intended to achieve personal happiness or pleasure. Morality, at the same time, concerns itself with fulfilling our duties towards others or promoting the good of the world. In many of our actions, however, we are moved neither by pleasure or happiness nor by fulfilling the duty that we owe other people or attempting to make the world a better place. As examples of actions that do not belong to these two categories, she gives the act of visiting a sick brother in the hospital and helping a friend move (Wolf, 2010, p. 4). In these cases, we act neither for egoistical reasons nor for moral ones. Rather, our actions are motivated by what she calls "reasons of love." Reasons of this kind are received from "a perceived or imagined value that lies outside of oneself" (p. 5), a value that is found in

non-personal pursuits that appeal to us even though they are not purely pleasurable or part of our moral duty. Helping a friend move can often be unpleasurable and physically taxing, and it is also not something that we do simply because it is our duty; we help our friend because we care about her. This is true of two other activities representing Wolf's more personal concern with love—staying awake all night sewing her daughter a Halloween costume and writing a philosophy paper (p. 5)—both of which are motivated neither by self-interest nor by duty. (We will return to similar examples below.) Thus, meaningfulness represents a good that is different from the goods of self-interest. It is a distinct ingredient in a well-lived life.

Meaning, according to Wolf's (2010) definition, "arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way" (p. 8). This definition encompasses three conditions. First, meaning involves a subjective element: the state of loving an object, which is an umbrella principle referring to different kinds of positive subjective attitudes and feelings towards objects, such as caring about them, being passionate about them, being engaged by them, being interested in them, and so on. If someone finds a certain activity or project utterly boring or uninspiring or feels alienated from it, then this activity or project will not bring forth the subjective element that we normally associate with a meaningful life. In fact, it seems to make her life feel quite the opposite, meaningless.

At the same time, meaning also requires that the objects of interest be worthy of this interest, or, in other words, that they be objectively valuable (Wolf, 2010, p. 9). Many types of objects, activities, or projects can attract a subjective feeling of interest, engagement, and the like, but not all of them are valuable. Here, Wolf considers people who spend their lives solving sudokus or smoking pot. Even though they might be fully immersed in their hobby, the activity itself is worthless, and consequently, it seems not to contribute to a meaningful life. The second condition, then, is an objective one, which postulates that the object of love be valuable.

Finally, a third condition is that the relationship between the subjectively positive feeling and the objective value must be active and direct. For the activity or project to be truly meaningful, one must be in an active relationship with the worthy object, whereas passive recognition of the object or an accidental relationship, such that the subjectively engaging activity has unintentional objectively valuable consequences, are cases in which something is lacking. For instance, a passionate pot-smoker's secondary smoke may alleviate the pain of the AIDS patient next door (p. 21). Although the first two conditions are met, it is difficult to say that smoking pot makes this person's life meaningful, since the connection between her subjective feeling and the objective value of the activity is unintentional and indirect.

The merit of this theory, claims Wolf, is that it both explains how ordinary people understand the factors that make a life meaningful and captures our more existential intuition that a meaningful life is to be evaluated as such from a viewpoint that is independent of our first-person perspective; that is, what the philosopher Thomas Nagel calls "the view from nowhere": the detached standpoint from which we become external spectators of our lives. The popular, or *endoxic*, opinions about the meaning of life are expressed in two views, which Wolf calls the "Fulfillment View" and the "Larger-Than-Oneself View." The first consists in the notion that a meaningful life is a life in which a person finds her passion and pursues it. This view associates meaningfulness with a certain type of good feeling and supposes that "doing what one loves doing, being involved with things one really cares about, gives one a kind of joy in life that one would otherwise be without" (p. 13). To follow the second popular view, a person's life becomes more meaningful when she becomes involved in something larger and more important than herself—a humanitarian relief project, a political movement, religious goals, and so on. Wolf understands the principle underlying these modes of involvement as referring to "something the value of which is independent of and has its source *outside of* oneself" (p. 19; emphasis in original). Her theory is a combination of the two, where the "Fulfillment View" is represented by the condition of a subjective good feeling and the "Larger-Than-Oneself View" is represented by the condition of the objective value that the objects of our engagement must possess. She summarizes her view, then, using the slogan that meaningfulness arises "when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it" (p. 26).

My claim is humble, but I believe it to be philosophically interesting in that it highlights the characteristics of the activity of mindfulness as a meaning-provider and proposes a refinement to the debates around Wolf's model, which, as I will elaborate below, revolve around the possibility of anchoring meaningfulness to an objective value, or even the need to do so, and around alternatives that appeal to subjective standards alone. My suggestion is that the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life is more direct than is admitted by other theories: mindfulness meditation, I wish to claim, is an activity that meets the three conditions for meaningful engagement (i.e., having a subjectively positive feeling, an objective value, and an active, direct relationship between them), and more specifically, the subjective and objective components are internal to it, making mindfulness meditation *intrinsically* meaningful in the sense described above. In other words, in mindfulness meditation, the three conditions put forward by Wolf are necessarily present, and, therefore, inseparable. As such, its contribution to meaningfulness is unmediated.

Most of the activities that we consider to be meaningful give rise to subjective attractiveness to particular people in particular times. That is, the sense of interest, engagement, care, or passion that they yield is contingent on personal circumstances. When it comes to mindfulness meditation and the mental state that it aims to evoke and ingrain, however, the positive feeling of being gripped by the activity is an essential part of the practice, for mindfulness simply *is* engagement. Mindfulness is a state of mind that occupies itself with its objects, be it the subject's breath, her physical sensations, her feelings, or the fact of her impermanent existence. In contemporary mindfulness practices in particular, mindfulness is an attentive care for the subject's state of being in the present moment. To put it differently, mindfulness meditation cannot be exercised without the presence of at least some of the qualities that Wolf includes in the category of subjectively positive attitudes.

Like other respondents to Wolf's theory (Adams, 2010; Haidt, 2010), I wish to ground my claims in the stories of real people, present-day practitioners of vipassana (the Buddhist practice that gave rise to current versions of mindfulness meditation). In his study of Buddhist modernism, McMahan (2009) quotes the African-American novelist and Buddhist practitioner Charles Johnson, who describes the sort of engaged quality that is internal to the practice. According to Johnson,

> it matters not at all if the activity we're talking about is writing a novel, preparing dinner, teaching a class, serving tea, or simply walking, the spiritual point is everywhere and always the same: Any action is performed best and most beautifully, especially unpleasant tasks, when the actor practices what Buddhists call "mindfulness"; when he is wholly and selflessly aware of every nuance in the activity and immersed in it. (Johnson, 2003, quoted in McMahan, 2009, pp. 226–227)

As McMahan comments, "mindfulness here is asserted to be more than an effective way of inspiring writing; it has become a specific technique for attending to the details of the world and the nuances of the mind in ways that bring about epiphanies" (p. 227).

Pagis's (2019) ethnographic research centers on the lives of vipassana practitioners, who apply mindfulness practice as a means of being attentively present in their most significant life activities. Her findings provide a similar impression. In Pagis's words, "Vipassana practitioners offered many descriptions of using vipassana when their mind wanders in lecture halls or during work—in all these cases they used awareness of sensations to 'bring themselves back' to the present" (p. 87). She describes a recurring episode from her own daily life, which resonates with Wolf's personal and philosophical concerns:

> While reading a book to my son at night, which does not require complete concentration, I will sometimes notice that "I am not here." Instead I am thinking of my next article or a work-related concern. When that happens, I turn my attention to the movements in my mouth that create the spoken word. Attending to the movements allows me to stay focused in the present situation and listen to my own voice reading the story out loud. (Pagis, 2019, p. 87)

Mindfulness as an activity, then, has the intrinsic quality of attentiveness to and engagement in the activity to which it is applied, and in this way, it exhibits the subjective quality of a meaningful activity.

As some will reasonably argue, mindfulness meditation is not always fulfilling or accompanied by a state of engagement. For many meditators, at least some of the practice is spent attempting to focus on the object of meditation, daydreaming about more fulfilling and engaging activities, or simply being distracted by other stimuli. Does this mean that the characterization of mindfulness meditation as necessarily engaging with its object in a positive way is flawed? It cannot be denied that this activity is often accompanied by states of mind that are the opposite of engagement, such as boredom or distraction, and while first-order boredom and distraction themselves can become the object of second-order mindfulness, once more giving rise to the quality of positive engagement, there are also cases where mindfulness remains unengaging. This, I believe, is not a sign that mindfulness is only contingently engaging, but rather that its optimal state, in which attention and engagement are present, is only contingently reached. As Pagis's informants testify, the focused attention that is brought about by vipassana meditation requires constant maintenance, and "with the decline of meditation, this mode of self-monitoring declines. Most vipassana meditators reported that when they do not meditate they feel their emotional reactions begin to get out of sync, and their control over their behavior and responses decreases" (Pagis, 2019, p. 91).

To clarify, my point is that in some meaningful activities, the subjective fulfillment is a byproduct of the activity, as in many of the examples considered by Wolf, whereas in others, it is an *essential* quality of the activity and hence inseparable from it. Mindfulness meditation is a representative of the second group. Indeed, creating art, embracing positive relationships with family and friends, or engaging with social causes (Wolf, 2010, pp. 36–37) are all activities that may generate positive feelings of fulfillment. But these activities and their respective feelings are not inextricable. On the other hand, mindfulness meditation, in its optimal mode, revolves around the positive state of engagement. This feature is not unique to mindfulness meditation. I believe that it characterizes a broader class of activities, such as praying and learning, of which intentionality and attention to the object are fundamental aspects.

The Problem of Objectivity

As we see, then, the subjective component of meaningfulness is, in an important sense, intrinsic to mindfulness. What about the objective component? To understand my characterization of mindfulness meditation as objectively valuable, let me return to Wolf's theory and to the difficulty raised by the objective requirement. The intuition that our projects and activities should be objectively worthy of our attraction, in addition to being subjectively pleasing, arises from noticing that certain types of projects and activities are *not* valuable, even if some people may be enthusiastic about them. As examples of activities that are almost obviously not objectively worthwhile, Wolf (2010) mentions solving sudoku puzzles, making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, and the stock philosophical example of Sisyphus, who ceaselessly rolls a stone up the hill without this having any useful outcome (p. 36). Yet the question of objectivity remains open and is difficult to answer (p. 35): Which objects are worthy of love and how does one determine whether an activity is fitting or worthy of independent value?

Wolf provides two initial pointers. Many of the cases that we consider problematic from the point of view of meaningfulness are either useless or involve activities that are routinized or mechanical. "It seems plausible to propose," she reasons, "that activities that are useful are to that extent better candidates for grounding claims of meaningfulness." Similarly, "an activity's or project's suitability as a meaning-provider rises as it becomes more challenging, or as it offers greater opportunity for a person to develop her powers or realize her potential" (p. 36). And yet, she acknowledges that these standards are too broad and that they can be met by a diverse range of activities, and therefore proposes a better criterion: an objectively worthwhile activity or project is one that possesses "a value whose source comes from outside of oneself—whose value, in other words, is partly independent of one's own attitude to it" (p. 37). This principle can be understood in at least two ways. According to the first understanding, subject-independence means that the value lies at least partly outside of oneself; that is, the value is not just a value for the person themselves, but is independent of their own existence and point of view. In the second, stricter understanding, in addition to the independence of value as captured by the first sense of subject-independence, the standard of judgment for determining value must also lie partly outside of oneself (pp. 41–43).

The demand that the value that grants the project or activity its worth should lie outside of oneself, and more strongly, that the standard for determining this value should be subject-independent in this way, is an Achilles' heel of Wolf's theory. Although she acknowledges that the values or standards need not be radically objective—that is, they may satisfactorily "fall in between the radically subjective and the radically objective" (p. 45)—this requirement raises questions as to our epistemic ability to discover such non-subjective values or standards. Consequently, how are we to determine which objects of attraction are non-subjectively valuable? Wolf considers a number of solutions. For instance, she proposes that we could opt for developing intersubjective accounts, "according to which whether something is valuable depends on whether it is valued by a community of valuers" (p. 46). A different solution is to appeal to an idealized individual or group—a sufficiently rational, perceptive, and knowledgeable entity, whose hypothetical judgments are to be taken as authoritative. Wolf herself believes that the question of non-subjective value is an unsolved problem in philosophy (p. 47). According to her, the best available way of deliberating on the matter is to appeal to the validation of time and the wisdom of the crowd. In her words, "I expect that almost anything that a significant number of people have *taken* to be valuable over a long span of time is valuable" (p. 47; emphasis in original). Ultimately, then, the different criteria for the objective component of meaningfulness that Wolf considers do not aim to reveal radically objective values that are embedded in the fabric of the universe. Instead, they all appeal, in different ways, to the human perspective.

Considering the issue of non-subjective values and the fundamental difficulty that it involves, some have suggested that we can and should account for meaningfulness without insisting on this condition at all. Cahn (2007) believes that it does not make sense to judge a person's life as either meaningful or meaningless and that any activity or way of life that someone finds worthwhile and pleasurable is valuable. In his words, "Why not allow others to pursue their own ways of life without disparaging their choices and declaring their lives meaningless?... If a person can find delights that bring no harm, such a discovery should not be denigrated but appreciated" (pp. 90–91). Haidt (2010), at the same time, suggests that the problem of objective value can be solved by relying on subjective elements alone. Wolf's theory of objective meaning can be replaced by "vital engagement," which is "a relationship to the world that is characterized both by experiences of flow (enjoyed absorption) and by meaning (subjective significance)" (Csikszentmihalyi, quoted in Haidt, 2010, p. 94). While he believes that the problem of objectivity is insoluble, the quality of connection that is characteristic of vital engagement can set the standard for meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Problematic cases, which we would not consider meaningful activities, simply do not lend themselves to vital engagement; that is, most people cannot really find flow in them (p. 96).

Writing in the context of East Asian thought and cross-cultural philosophy, Kalmanson (2020) usefully conceptualizes these conversations as being framed by an

implicit understanding of subject-object dualism, which stems from Western philosophy's legacy of espousing the dichotomy between realism and idealism (pp. 19–20). Each side in this dualism is fraught with philosophical concerns:

> If we agree with Wolf that some activities or projects are objectively meaningful, then not only we are tasked with deciding what counts as objective meaning, but we face larger epistemological issues of how we know anything "objectively" at all. Yet if we agree with Cahn that meaning is purely subjective, then we face not only the specter of nihilism but a wider range of metaphysical issues regarding the status of so-called subjective reality. (pp. 19–20)

Kalmanson (2020) maintains that the non-dualist system of the Buddhist Mahāyāna philosophy, which rests on the principle of emptiness and denies the divide between the inner self and the external world, marks a departure from the dilemmas of subject-object duality (p. 58). From this non-dualist standpoint, inner transformations and outer manifestations are one and the same. As she emphasizes in her discussion of the work of the Buddhist nun Kim Iryŏp, they are both

> expressions of the same action of selfless creativity [which] establishes the Buddhist world of meaning far and wide. The important distinction is not between subject and object but between those subjects who are at the mercy of karmic conditions and those who have attained freedom and hence the power to create. (Kalmanson, 2020, p. 64)

Simply put, according to Kalmanson's reading, the creation of meaning takes place in the subject and the world simultaneously.

There is yet another respect in which Buddhist thought can defy the dualism of subjectivism and objectivism and open new possibilities for approaching the problem of objective value. I would like to challenge the subject-object logic by acknowledging a third category that lies between the two poles—the class of subjective conditions for objective values. Mindfulness, I propose, is a prominent member of this category. Although the mental state of mindfulness—the attitude cultivated by mindfulness meditation—is a subjective state occurring within the practitioner's consciousness, it has an indispensable cognitive role in revealing meaningfulness in the world and engaging with meaningful activities and projects. Mindfulness is the quality of being present, of being attentive and aware, and it is, therefore, a cognitive condition for any rich, fully meaningful activity and for rising above the condition of alienation. As Dreyfus (2011) clarifies, mindfulness is

> the ability of the mind to remain present to the object without floating away. . . . It is this retentive ability that allows the mind to hold the object in the ken of the attention as well as remember it later. . . . This retentive ability is central to account for how mindfulness operates cognitively and goes a long way to explain the cognitive transformations brought about by this practice. (p. 46)

In other words, the mental state of mindfulness, which mindfulness meditation induces, falls between the radically objective and the radically subjective insofar as it is a subjective requirement for any exploration of objective meaning or standards of values. It derives its objective worth from its role in revealing objective values and engaging in objectively valuable projects and activities, and this is true of mindfulness even if the precise conditions for the latter two are yet to be articulated.

In short, to the provisional standards of objectivity proposed by Wolf and others—among which are the usefulness of the activity, the fact that it offers a person the opportunity to realize her potential, and Arpaly's (2010) notion that a meaningful activity is one that must satisfy basic human intellectual and emotional needs—we can now add the standard that an activity that serves as a condition for meaningfulness is meaningful in itself. In Buddhist psychology, cognitive states such as attention (*manasikāra*), concentration (*samādhi*), and clear comprehension (*samprajñāna*) constitute conditions of this kind (Dreyfus, 2011, pp. 48–50). We could even moderate and extend this standard to include activities that are not required for meaning but facilitate it. Actions that have the nature of facilitating the creation of meanings in life appear to be good candidates for possessing an objective value. To this group, we could add, for example, the activities of learning or psychotherapeutic conversation, which tend to assist in the production of meanings. I believe that this account intelligibly explains one class of objectively meaningful activities.

In his comparative analysis of mindfulness and phenomenology, Bitbol (2019) suggests what seems to oppose this view, namely, that mindfulness meditation inhibits meaning. In his words,

> The semantic function of mental and verbal activities is their tendency to meaning ascription: a perceived profile means a thing, a phoneme means an object or a state of affairs. . . . By suspending any semantic function, both the *epochè* and mindfulness inactivate the usual rush of mental life towards the future, towards something else than what is flatly here. . . . As a natural consequence, the epochè and mindfulness may trigger a feeling of meaninglessness. . . . As for the practice of *mindfulness*, it may sometimes trigger a negative feeling, similar to the depressing one experienced by

> a few practitioners of shamatha meditation who have gone astray . . . But this feeling of meaninglessness is still an intermediate stage on the path towards a complete suspension of judgment and meaning-ascription; at the end of this process, even the possible feeling of meaninglessness is taken as it stands, namely as a mere feeling. (pp. 136–137; italicization follows original)

My own understanding is that the progression theorized by Bitbol constitutes in itself an intermediate stage in a still broader cognitive process of meaning ascription. Even under the suspension of the semantic function, mindfulness provides fresh perspectives on reality, which have the power to facilitate new meanings in subsequent stages, when these perspectives are semantically explored. It seems to me that Bitbol hints at this, in maintaining that the "truly mindful stance . . . of full acceptance" gives rise to a meta-feeling that can be characterized "sometimes as an unmotivated joy, sometimes as a glare of freshness, sometimes as an impression of seeing the crucial issues of existence answered without words, and without even asking them" (p. 137).

To return to the case study of vipassana practitioners, here is how Pagis describes the role of mindfulness in the lives of two of her informants:

> Tom and Rebecca represent two common trajectories taken by the meditators that I followed. While these trajectories seem strikingly distinct, they reveal a central dynamic in vipassana practice: for my informants, meditation was not a mere background to their biographies, and its meaning was not confined to the situated practice. Meditators understood meditation and explained it in light of their long-term biography and life course and vice versa: their life stories received meaning and trajectories in light of meditation practice. Meditation triggered self-reflection that referred to the past, present, and future, oriented one's life course, and organized the meaning given to the autobiographical self. To meditate, then, is not only an in-situ practice that focuses on the present; it includes a trajectory of "becoming." (Pagis, 2019, pp. 125–126)

Indeed, vipassana practitioners recognize mindfulness's potential to track meanings and intentionally employ it for this purpose: "The third description I encountered portrayed a period of self-exploration for frames of meaning that included alternative forms of spirituality. Here people said that they were 'searching' for something—be it meaning, direction, or an otherworldly experience that would ground or center their life" (p. 130). Practitioners perceive mindfulness meditation "as a tool in the search for subjective well-being, happiness, and meaning" (p. 146). Clearly, mindfulness meditation can be worthwhile in other ways, which are compatible with the standards put forth by Wolf: participants may forge new interpersonal connections with other practitioners; they may find that the meditation challenges them and contributes to their personal growth; or they may cultivate a sense of belonging to practitioners' communities. Indeed, mindfulness also meets Wolf's criterion of being valued by a community of valuers, of being an activity that has been taken to be valuable by a significant number of people over a vast stretch of human history. My point, however, is that by virtue of meeting the standard proposed above, this activity is objectively valuable in a further sense: it both serves as a subjective condition for and facilitates any type of objective meaning in life.

Conclusion

The characterization of mindfulness meditation provided above aimed to establish two main claims. The first is that mindfulness, seen as an activity, plays a more direct role in instilling life-meanings in subjects who pursue it. Rather than being a trait that generates other psychological states, which contribute to their owners' sense of meaningfulness, mindfulness provides and explains in itself its correlation with having meaning in life. Mindfulness is directly responsible for meaningfulness as it intrinsically involves positive attention and engagement (the mental state of mindfulness). I do not wish to claim that mindfulness meditation does not also indirectly generate meaning through the different mechanisms theorized by the psychological studies surveyed above, but there are more intimate connections between the two owing to mindfulness's particular features. If my observations are correct, then it is possible that Wolf's framework offers us a promising theoretical basis for empirical studies of mindfulness and meaning.

The second claim is more philosophical in nature: mindfulness meditation integrates in itself the subjective fulfillment and objective value that Wolf ascribes to meaningful activities. In this way, it is a paradigmatic case of two classes of special activities. From one side, it represents activities that inherently involve an attentive, engaged mental attitude; that is, activities that are intrinsically attracted to their objects through positive engagement. From another side, mindfulness represents a class of activities that facilitate the production of meaning, and in this way, obtain a non-subjective worth. These distinct qualities make mindfulness a particularly interesting case study for thinking about the conditions of a meaningful life.

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