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In Defence of Bare Attention

A Phenomenological Interpretation of Mindfulness

Abstract: *'Mindfulness' is arguably the most important concept to have transplanted from Buddhist thought to contemporary Western psychology. However, whilst mindfulness was already an ambiguous term in the original context, specified more by a set of practices than by a clear definition, its cross-cultural transmission has blurred its content even further. In this paper, I assess the recent criticism of the widespread definition of mindfulness as non-elaborative, purely receptive 'bare attention'. According to the critics of bare attention, what can be characterized as purely receptive is the automatic turning of attention toward an object. But should mindfulness be a quality of consciousness that is to be established and developed by the reflexive practice of meditation, it must be something more than this automatic turning of attention. This paper shows how the definition of mindfulness as bare attention can be defended by explicating it in terms of the phenomenological model of attention.*

There is no one definition of mindfulness or *sati*, and the differences lie not only between the psychological notion of mindfulness and the Buddhist term *sati*. In various places of the Buddhist canon, the word *sati* is used with different meanings, and similarly the sense of the word mindfulness varies in psychological literature, in questionnaires that define it through variegated scales, as well as within the framework of therapeutic work. Bodhi (2011, p. 22) has summarized the situation as follows: 'The word "mindfulness" is itself so vague and

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elastic that it serves almost as a cipher into which we can read virtually anything we want.'

Is there any accord, then? Bishop *et al.* (2004, p. 232) express the consensus which has hitherto governed the conceptualization of mindfulness thus: mindfulness is 'a kind of non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is'. This 'consensual definition' clearly and symptomatically draws upon Buddhism. As Gethin (2011) and Sharf (2015) note, this is a reformed Buddhism, spread around the world thanks to the influential book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by the Sri Lankan monk of German origin Nyanaponika (1901–1994). It is here that the definition of *sati* appears as 'bare attention', i.e. as 'a purely receptive state of mind', in which the mind refrains from reacting to impulses (Nyanaponika, 2005, pp. 32–3).

This definition of mindfulness, which had played a role in the reception of meditation techniques outside of traditionally Buddhist countries, has recently come under attack. For instance, Bodhi (2011, p. 27), Nyanaponika's direct disciple, claims that the expression 'bare attention' is meant as a meditational instruction for beginners, without pertaining to the more advanced work during insight meditation (*vipassana*) or the Buddhist view of mindfulness.

In this paper, I shall stake out where the critique of Nyanaponika's definition is cogent and where, on the contrary, it misses its target. I will show that the definition of mindfulness as bare attention is based on the causal relationship between effects of stimuli in the mind and the meditation reflexive attention, and thus it cannot be simply dismissed. However, since Nyanaponika himself does not formulate this relation clearly, it is necessary to expound on the notion of mindfulness using a general model of attention.

1. A Critique of Bare Attention

Nyanaponika's definition of mindfulness as bare attention can be summarized in three theses:

1. 'Bare attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception. It is called "bare", because it attends just to the bare facts of a perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind which, for Buddhist thought, constitutes the sixth sense' (Nyanaponika, 2005, p. 32). Mindfulness is thus a reflexive

turn of attention to one's own experiencing, in which attention records without further reaction what is taking place in the mind and the body.

2. Bare attention turns attention to the initial phase of the process of perception, in which 'the mind is in a purely receptive state, and when attention is restricted to a bare noticing of the object' (*ibid.*, pp. 33f.). As the author explains further, in ordinary perception this phase has a very brief and hardly perceptible duration, furnishing a 'superficial, incomplete and often faulty picture of the object' (*ibid.*).

3. The goal of mindfulness meditation is maintenance, reinforcement, and clarification of this receptive state of mind. Bare attention cleanses the object of the stains of prejudice and passion by slowing down the transition from the receptive to the active part of perception. Consequently, 'bare attention... allows things to speak for themselves' (*ibid.*, p. 38).

This last point speaks to Naynaponika's understanding of the effect of mindfulness meditation. Meditation is a reflexive work of attention, that is, attention turned to one's own experiencing. This reflexivity, however, improves not only the ability of observing one's own experiencing, but also non-reflexive attention. According to Nyanaponika, meditation brings reflexive attention into a receptive state, thereby reinforcing the general receptivity of attention. By virtue of meditation, we learn the attitude of the mere registering of all and sundry stimuli, be it our own experiences or objects in the world. Meditation is thus a return to a state of mind with which ordinary perception begins at every moment, and an attempt to remain in this state for as long as possible.

Let me note that although Nyanaponika's notion of 'bare attention' has an unambiguous meaning of 'purely receptive awareness', the author uses it to describe two different mental acts. At one point, it marks the quality of reflexive attention, which allows Nyanaponika to define bare attention as mindfulness, i.e. a quality of awareness which develops through meditation. At another point, it denotes the incipient phase of perceiving any object, i.e. not only one's own experiences (during meditation). In other words, Nyanaponika defines mindfulness by means of the same words with which he describes a general receptivity of the mind — as 'bare attention'.

This definition of mindfulness as bare attention has been taken up by Gunaratana (2011, p. 134), who adds another characteristic: the initial grasping of the object in the mind is pre-conceptual (*ibid.*, p.

132). Through meditation, we endeavour to reach pre-conceptual observation.[1]

Recently, Bodhi (2011), Dreyfus (2011), Gethin (2011), and Olendzki (2011) have all objected to conceiving mindfulness as bare attention. I leave aside that part of their argumentation that concerns the fidelity of Nyanaponika's characterization of mindfulness to canonical Buddhist texts. In what follows, I will focus only on those issues that concern the definition of mindfulness and the functioning of mindful attention.

The common theme of the criticism is the distinction between those mental features that belong to any attention and those that belong only to mindful attention. Thus, what can be characterized as purely receptive is the automatic turning of attention towards an object. Surely that presents the incipient phase of any attention, including mindful attention. But should mindfulness be a quality of consciousness that is to be established and developed by the reflexive practice of meditation, it must be something more than this automatic turning of attention.

When it comes to what exactly the distinctive feature of mindfulness is, opinions differ:

1. Dreyfus (2011, p. 45) reverts to a traditional delineation of mindfulness as 'not wobbling' and explains that it is the retention of the object in working memory that prevents the mind from getting carried away by the fleeting stream of data and to attend to objects in a sustained way. He characterizes mindfulness as 'paying close attention to an object, leading to the retention of the data so as to make sense of the information delivered by our cognitive apparatus' (*ibid.*, p. 47). Accordingly, mindfulness meditation strengthens 'cognitive control' because it increases practitioners' abilities to retain information.

Dreyfus (*ibid.*, p. 49) further qualifies this 'close attention' by distinguishing between mindfulness and concentration. Whereas concentration keeps the mind 'unified on its object' at the cost of narrowing focus, mindfulness both retains information about its object and expands the scope of attention. In another context, Dreyfus (*ibid.*, p. 50) mentions the metaphor of the watchman in illustrating the

[1] Since further analysis of the relation between conceptualization and attention, however important, would lead me astray from the main topic of this paper (i.e. the relation between mindfulness and attention), I shall leave this point aside.

functioning of mindfulness. A watchman does not focus on particular objects one by one but is ready to notice anything that might happen. Mindfulness would be this readiness, which is different from concentration on a particular object.

To sum up, according to Dreyfus, mindfulness, far from being present-centred and pre-conceptual, is best understood as retentive and cognitive.

2. Another way of delineating mindfulness is found in Bodhi (2011, p. 25): '*Sati* makes the apprehended object stand forth vividly and distinctly before the mind.' Mindfulness is thus marked by lucidity, with which attention turns to its object. Lucidity is furthermore defined as the object's emergence in the forefront. Thus, instead of bare attention we should, according to Bodhi, define mindfulness as 'lucid awareness' (*ibid.*, p. 19).

3. Olendzki offers yet another characterization of mindfulness. It is a 'quality of mind by means of which the object is regarded' that neither favours nor opposes the object, but rather expresses an attitude of equanimity (Olendzki, 2011, p. 61). It is an 'even-minded attitude' of 'balanced objectivity' (*ibid.*). Importantly, Olendzki explicitly distinguishes the transformation of the mind by mindfulness meditation from the liberation of the mind by the practice of insight meditation. Even though mindfulness blocks the arising of 'unwholesome' states like greed or hatred, complete liberation from suffering comes firstly with direct *understanding* of the impermanent and selfless nature of all experiences.

No matter how different these characterizations are from each other, they approach mindfulness from the same angle. They all rely on explaining the role of mindfulness as a prerequisite for understanding the nature of experience. Thus, they regard mindfulness as a means of achieving knowledge. In order for the meditator to achieve transformative knowledge, it is necessary to retain information about the object observed and to have vivid and balanced attention. Accordingly, the meditation does not develop mindfulness for the sake of this quality alone, but in order to gain insight into the impermanence of observed phenomena. By emphasizing this cognitive aspect of mindfulness, Buddhist meditation practice differs from the current therapeutic use of meditation, which relies on the effects of meditation without requiring or seeking understanding.

Of these three definitions, only Olendzki's characterization of mindfulness as equanimity can explain the fact that meditation transforms the mind independently of cognition and long before the

meditator reaches the liberating insight. It is this therapeutic effect of meditation that Nyanaponika explains as a return to receptive bare attention. This difference between cognitive and therapeutic approaches to meditation is reflected also in the strikingly different interpretation of the notion of 'clear comprehension', which appears in the Buddhist canon side by side with *sati*. Whereas critics of bare attention (Bodhi, 2011, p. 22; Dreyfus, 2011, p. 51) interpret this notion as the key intermediate between mindfulness and insight, Nyanaponika (2005, pp. 49f.) conceives of it as the activity of consciousness outside of the formal practice of meditation. To undo suffering-inducing habits, according to Nyanaponika, we need to deepen the receptivity of consciousness, not necessarily to achieve a better comprehension of experiences observed.

Given that it is not by understanding, the question remains as to how mindful observation of the stream of experiences can 'decondition' our habits.[2] But this crucial point of argumentation is also neglected by Nyanaponika. He posits the transformative effect of bare attention on the mind simply as a fact that anybody can verify by their own practice.

In what follows, I will offer this missing piece of the explanation. As a first step, I will outline a phenomenological model of attention as formulated by Husserl, Gurwitsch, and Arvidson. Secondly, I will base the explanation of the transforming effect of meditation on this model. And finally, I will address the three points of criticism of the idea of bare attention, and offer answers to them.

2. A Phenomenology of Attention

At least from William James (1890, p. 437) onwards, Western psychology has differentiated between the centre and the periphery of attention. Phenomenology takes over this distinction and elaborates upon the notion of the 'field of attention', or — to use a recent term introduced by Arvidson (2006) — the 'sphere of attention'. Arvidson's model of attention provides a good point of departure because it both systematizes the accounts of his predecessors Gurwitsch and Husserl, and provides a richer account than they do. A distinctive feature of Arvidson's model is that it depicts attention as a

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2 The characterization of mindfulness as 'deconditioning of the human condition' comes from Barendregt (2011).

process of three dimensions: (1) theme, i.e. the content noticed in the focus or centre of attention; (2) thematic context, i.e. that which we notice by noticing the theme and which is relevant in terms of content for a given theme; (3) margin of attention, i.e. that which we notice by noticing the theme but which is irrelevant for both the theme of attention and its context. If for instance we turn our attention to a tree in the garden, the tree is the theme. The context is those parts of the garden that we perceive inadvertently in connection with the theme, e.g. the ground from which the tree grows or the patch across which it casts its shadow. In the margin of attention remain those stimuli pushed aside by the theme's context, e.g. a bird flying across the branches, to which almost no attention is paid, and yet it is partially known.

Let us pause to consider further one of the main contributions of Arvidson's approach to attention — the systematic exposition of the difference between the context and the margin of attention. Arvidson considers it a difference not in degree but in the mode of awareness. Consequently, he rejects any comparisons of attention to a ray of light, even in the more refined form of this metaphor, according to which the light of attention creates a gradual transition from a clearly illuminated centre via partly lit areas towards pitch darkness. Arvidson (*ibid.*, pp. 18f.), who in this point systematizes Gurwitsch's critique of Husserl, shows that transition in intensity can be found in any of the three dimensions of attention, which is why one cannot use it to delineate differences between these dimensions. In themes composed of multiple elements, e.g. when we focus our attention on a row of roses, one can distinguish between formative and formed constituents. Formative constituents create the theme's coherence, whereas the formed ones are merely its part. A similar difference in degree is also possible in the thematic context. A bee's buzzing in one of the roses is closer to the theme of a row of roses than the wind rustling through the leaves of the tree that casts its shadow over the rose patch — this would present a more distant part of the thematic context. And finally, even within the margin of attention one can distinguish between those stimuli one takes note of despite their disconnect from the theme, and those one completely ignores.

Further, attention has active and passive aspects. Each instance of attentional capture is a case both of something attracting our attention

and our turning our attention to something.[3] The active, subjective influence of what will attract attention is manifested in different forms. Attention is influenced by the will, either in the form of a deliberate turning of attention or a deliberate maintaining of attention to a chosen object. Expectations affect attention, whether in the form of an explicit looking-out for something or an implicit setting of attention to a particular type of object. Attention is further influenced by attitudes, be they emotions, prejudices, or intellectual understanding of the situation. And it may be affected to a varying extent: from the cases of projection where the subject is almost unable to notice anything other than what she herself brings to the situation, to the cases of great receptivity where she is open to noticing almost any kind of stimuli.

Phenomenological philosophy cannot answer empirical questions concerning the degree and rules of influencing attention or the dependence of attentional capture on the types of stimuli. But it can provide a general explanation of the way in which this internal setting affects what the subject notices. Consider, for simplicity, the case of attention influenced by the will. Strictly speaking, the subject cannot choose which individual stimulus will attract her attention, she can only favour a certain type of stimulus over other types. Likewise, no act of will can guarantee that the attention will not be captured by stimuli other than those to which the subject wants to attend. The fact that we can turn our attention arbitrarily or according to an instruction does not mean that the particular object of attention is determined by the will alone. Rather, the stimuli to which we turn our attention arbitrarily have been already noticed in the context or on the margin of attention, from whence they strive to get into the focus of attention. To be more precise, we can distinguish two aspects of the active influence

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3 This difference corresponds to the psychological concepts of endogenous and exogenous attentional control, and the concepts of attentional set and stimulus. Unfortunately, in the phenomenological literature, the reference of the term 'activity of attention' varies. Husserl (2001) and Blumenberg (2007) take it to mean the ego's 'grasping' of an object, which goes hand in hand with the turning of attention. Arvidson (2006) and Waldenfels (2004) connect activity of attention exclusively with a volitional act. But both are problematic, since the former approach is too formal and the latter too narrow. Based on the model of attention as a sphere of three dimensions, the 'activity of attention' is a matter of deciding what content will be presented in which dimension. Strictly speaking, it is not the attention itself that is active, but rather it is the influence on attention that comes from the subject, as opposed to stimuli that come from the world.

of the will on attention. (1) Volition provides attention with a *scheme* whereby the subject recognizes whether her attention was captured by the object intended. (2) The act of will is manifested as a disposition that establishes a *tendency* of attention to prefer as its theme those stimuli that correspond to the given scheme.[4] These two aspects of activity are also found in all the above-mentioned forms of active, subjective influence on attention.

Attention is subject to the scheme and preferences given by the subject. However, the subject can only give these 'silent rules' to attention, she cannot provide actual individual stimuli. It is always the saliency of a stimulus that makes attention turn to a particular object, even though the subject's attitudes usually influence which of the salient stimuli will be selected as the theme of attention. This effect of stimuli on the mind, which leads to something attracting attention, is here, in conformity with the phenomenological tradition, called the passivity of attention.

Husserl (2001, p. 196) conceives of passivity by means of the notion of affection. In the context of the phenomenology of attention, affection denotes a stimulus, which founds the mind's tendency to shift the centre of attention from one object to another. Affection in this sense is not limited to feeling or emotion, but includes any stimulus, whether felt or not. Affection has the character of a force which overlaps with neither a physical force nor a degree of cognition.

The affective force is not an effect of a physical force upon the mind, but rather the force of a stimulus as experienced by the mind. The degree of the affective force can be very different from the intensity of the physical event, governed as it is by the meaning this event has for consciousness. For instance, a sound we are all agog to hear can be barely audible, and yet we will not miss it. Yesterday's unpleasant encounter we keep thinking about no longer exists as a physical event, and yet it can affect us more than the sound of an approaching car.

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4 This first point is also emphasized by Arvidson: 'endogenous selection can at most prepare the sphere of attention for the likelihood or inevitability of such transformation of contents, just as the architect can prepare the blueprints' (2006, p. 82). However, in the second point, our interpretations are slightly different from one another. Arvidson argues that the subject 'allows' content to present itself as thematic. But this I find too weak, as the subject's activity is not just 'allowing'; it is rather the application of a certain preference.

But just as the affective force need not be directly proportional to the rising physical intensity, neither does it simply reflect the degree of knowledge. Something indistinct can attract far more attention than something distinct. Steinbock (2004, p. 31) offers a case in point: imagine meeting a friend at a party who seems to look somewhat different. You say: 'you got some new glasses', or 'you got your hair cut', or 'you shaved your beard', when actually the friend grew a moustache. In such a situation, attention is strongly affected by something we do not clearly discern.

According to the effect on the attention one can distinguish three degrees of the affective force. (1) At zero affection the object does not exist at all for consciousness, for example a sound inaudible for the human ear. (2) Affection causes a change in the centre of attention, according to which the thematic context and margin of attention become reorganized. This happens every time we turn our attention to something. (3) Affection does not cause a change in the theme of attention, but merely a change in the thematic context, or it even becomes pushed aside to the margin of attention. This happens when something affects the understanding of the object we are paying attention to, or when something influences our behaviour without attracting attention to itself.

The affective force is closely connected to the conception of attention as a multidimensional field or sphere. The mind is never affected merely by one affective force alone. The centre of attention is placed at an intersection of combatting forces. Distinguishing among the relations between simultaneous and consecutive affections, one can claim the following. (1) At every moment, the centre of attention is occupied by a stimulus with the highest affective force. (2) The affective force does not exhaust itself by combatting other affective forces, but affects the mind for a certain time or transfers itself onto another affection. In other words, every stimulus founds within the mind not only the tendency of turning attention to itself, but also the tendency to prefer a certain type of stimuli to others. Every new affection thus enters the attentional field, which is always already predisposed towards a certain mode of perception, preferring the continuation of recent experience. For instance, a quiet tone, which under other circumstances would not attract attention, will nonetheless be noticed thanks to its placement within a melody. In this connection, Gurwitsch (1964, p. 358) coins the notion of a 'positional index', which expresses the sum total of what lends the theme its attentional context. Husserl (2001, p. 212) speaks of a variable 'affective relief',

thanks to which the affective force has no absolute value, but just a value that is relative to other simultaneous and consecutive forces.

Finally, these three aspects of the attentional field — activity, passivity, and the three dimensions — are to be understood in their mutual relationship. At each moment, the interplay of passivity and activity of attention determines in what dimension of attention a particular stimulus will be presented to the subject. The tendency proceeding from momentary stimuli and the tendency proceeding from implicit and explicit preferences of the subject may support or oppose each other. And over time, passive tendencies arising from stimuli 'sediment' in the mind and become part of its active expectations.

3. Meditation and Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation denotes a number of exercises and the meditational practices of various schools or teachers do not necessarily take the same form. There is, however, a broad, albeit loose, correspondence in the aim and form of these exercises, just as there is a loose basis for an understanding of the notion of mindfulness. A typical entrance exercise in meditational practice is attentive observance of breathing, described by Nyanaponika (2005), as well as many other authors. The exercise which in my opinion best shows the fundament of meditation and mindfulness is non-selective observation, instructions for which we find, for example, in Kabat-Zinn (1990). Both exercises are part of the formal practice of meditation, during which the meditator devotes herself exclusively to meditation (as opposed to using meditational principles during everyday activities).

While observing her breathing, the meditator endeavours to keep in the centre of her attention the sensations connected to breathing, usually in the area of the abdomen or nostrils. Whenever attention strays away from breathing toward any other stimuli, the meditator takes note of that, returning her attention back to breathing. This exercise first of all improves concentration, so over time the meditator is capable of following longer and longer her changing sensations, without her attention swerving away from breathing. Furthermore, what improves is the use of the will *vis-à-vis* attention, with the growth of the ability to aim attention towards breathing — according to instructions — whenever another stimulus enters the focus. Finally, this exercise improves the ability to notice that attention has focused

itself on something other than breath. Gradually, the meditator more readily notices these deviations, and can return attention to breathing sooner and more often.

During non-selective observation of sensations, the instruction to return attention to breathing no longer holds. The meditator notices the change in the focus of attention, but no longer determines volitionally what her attention should turn to subsequently. The meditator no longer supervises whether her attention is turned to breathing, but observes instead whether it is still focused on the same object or not. Thus, the meditator's interest shifts from *what* her attention is turned to (whether breathing or something else) to the question of whether it is still observing the same thing (whatever that is) or something else. In other words, the meditator pays attention to the emergence and disappearance of objects in the focus of attention.

Observation of breathing improves concentration and the application of volition to attention; and it enhances reflexive receptivity. Non-selective observation, by contrast, is not primarily an exercise in concentration; rather it already requires a certain ability to concentrate, since a concentrated retention of the object in her attention gives the meditator time to notice whether the object in the focus of attention has changed or not. This exercise fosters the ability to leave undecided what should reach the centre of attention. As long as the meditator cannot refrain from preferring certain stimuli, it is desirable for them to treat acts of volition as equal to any other stimulus — to realize that they have become the theme of attention once they themselves appear in its focus. Similarly, the meditator can become aware of some other of her evaluations, habits, and attitudes that influence the course of her meditational observation. It is particularly desirable to notice them becoming the theme of attention without reacting to them. If they have not become themes of attention, there is no point in investigating their effect on the attention. Just as by observing one's breathing, non-selective observation increases the speed with which the meditator notices that a change in the focus of attention has occurred. In other words, time shortens during which they observe something without being aware of it.

This last point, the improvement in reflexive receptivity, is a common denominator of both exercises, evoking the effect aimed at in Nyanaponika's definition of mindfulness. If the meditator notices her attention has just turned towards a certain object, this attention becomes easier to extricate from that object. A consequence of reflexive direction of attention is that the stimulus that has just

attracted attention does not spread further through the mind. And vice versa, if the subject observes something without being aware *that* in the centre of attention is just this object, attention tends to retain the given object at the expense of other stimuli, or to turn toward associations connected to this object.

This consequence of reflexively noticing that something has become the object of attention is used in both meditational exercises described here. However, observation of breathing is additionally accompanied with the volitional act that ensures the turning of attention towards a predetermined object. Observation of breathing is a suitable initial exercise as on the one hand it reinforces concentration, and on the other it does not require the meditator to refrain from preferring certain types of stimuli volitionally, which is difficult. Given that the crux of meditation is regarded here as the cultivation of the ability to extricate oneself from the influence of stimuli thanks to reflexive attention, the instruction to return attention towards breathing actually presents a certain limitation. When observing breathing, the space for new stimuli, created by extrication from the current stimulus, is immediately occupied by the anticipation of breathing sensations. Non-selective observation, on the other hand, purposefully does not fill up this space, leaving undecided which stimulus is to attract attention.

Observing changes in the centre of attention, i.e. paying reflexive attention to what has just become the object of attention, is the shared ingredient of exercises called mindfulness meditation. However, simply to identify mindfulness with this kind of observation would still be simplistic. Mindfulness proper is an effect which these exercises of reflexive attention immediately call forth. Thus, mindfulness is the non-development or non-elaboration of a stimulus caused by noticing that this stimulus has just caught one's attention. Expressed in terms of the phenomenological model of attention, mindfulness consists in stopping the spreading of the affective force of a stimulus through the mind caused by the shift of the focus of attention to the fact that an object has just become the theme of attention. Mindfulness meditation seeks to achieve this effect intentionally by instructing the meditator to focus her attention exclusively on the emergence and disappearance of objects in the focus of attention.

Mindfulness is here defined as an immediate effect of meditation: by noticing changes in the focus of attention, we refrain from spreading the affective force through the mind. This definition relies neither on possible accompanying phenomena of meditation, nor on

further possible effects of mindfulness. (1) From the definition of mindfulness, all relations towards the content of stimuli affecting attention should be excluded. Mindfulness is not the ability to relate the object of attention reflexively to *what* the subject is experiencing, although even this can be one of the outcomes of meditational exercises. Neither is mindfulness an attitude of curiosity about one's own experiences, as Bishop *et al.* (2004, p. 233) have proposed. Curiosity can be a motivation for meditation, but it is decidedly not a necessary feature, much less an effect, of meditational reflexive attention. (2) The proposed definition of mindfulness does not preclude it from being considered as a means to developing equanimity and to reaching insight into the three marks of existence, as described by the Buddhist tradition, i.e. impermanence, suffering, and non-self. But as mindfulness is not just a means for acquiring something else, its definition should capture what it is in itself.

Mindfulness works with the principles of the spreading of the affective force through consciousness. The competition of affective forces takes place in the attentional field already formed by the workings of past affective forces and subjective attitudes. Meditation is based upon the fact that reflexive noticing of change in the centre of attention stops the spreading of the effects of the stimulus that has caused the attention to turn towards the current object. Mindfulness extricates the mind momentarily from the present constellation of active and passive attentional tendencies. By noticing that something has become the theme of attention, it is as if the attention had put a question to the stimulus: whether or not it is powerful enough to determine what henceforth shall be the theme of attention. Mindfulness thus causes a new 'decision making' regarding the theme of attention. We cannot change the effects of stimuli on the mind. But what we can do — and what we indeed do during meditation — is to 'ask' each and every stimulus this question. Meditational practice thus adds to the theory of attention a general piece of knowledge: reflexive noticing stops the spreading of affective force for the given moment, thereby limiting the influence of the present affective context upon future stimuli.

Consequently, mindfulness improves the general ability to notice stimuli, be they our own experiencing or objects of the outside world. This improvement, however, is indirect. Mindfulness does not enhance the sensitivity of the senses and cannot cause us to begin to perceive something that hitherto has had zero affective value. Still, by lessening the impact of the past stimuli upon the present, it gives a

chance to stimuli that would have otherwise been pushed aside into the margin of attention. By reflexively noticing the objects in the centre of attention, the meditator creates a condition under which attention can fill up with a content unrelated to the course of experiencing thus far. This opening of attention cannot be reached at a stroke by an act of will, whereby we would, so to speak, invite unknown stimuli into awareness. The meditational cultivation of receptivity takes place via a repeated reflexive noticing which gradually takes away from habitual attentional schemes their affective force.

Therefore, in addition to activity and passivity of attention, we should distinguish also its receptivity. Attention is subject both to the automatism of inclining toward a stimulus and to the automatism of developing this stimulus according to patterns and associations given both by the current stimulus and the subjective affective context. What meditation adds to the repertoire of reactions whereby attention follows after a stimulus is reflexive noticing, by which we refrain from further development of that stimulus and open ourselves to stimuli which may surpass the already-established affective patterns. Receptivity hereby gained does not cancel the passivity of attention, but instead influences what stimuli we will be exposed to in the future. When we stop the spreading of the current affective force, space is made for other affections. This space does not provide attention with the freedom to turn to any stimulus, but just the freedom not to develop the current stimulus. Regarding the future stimulus entering this space, attention is again subject to active and passive tendencies. These tendencies cannot be eluded, but by being mindful we take up an attitude towards them. We cannot pick the object of attention by ourselves, even if the affective force of the past were completely exhausted. We can, however, continue the better to open our attention to what is in the process of coming, i.e. by being mindful, to become more receptive towards the context and margin of attention.

This phenomenological interpretation of the effects of meditation enables us both to value Nyanaponika's definition of mindfulness as bare attention and to take a more differentiated stance to it. As we saw above, Nyanaponika characterizes mindfulness by three features: (A) it reflexively notices objects of attention without reacting to them; (B) it returns the process of perception to its initial stage; and (C) it cleanses attention of habitual patterns of experiencing. Now, we can reformulate these three points in phenomenological terms and thus base them on the general model of attention.

(A) Our analysis established two points. (1) Mindfulness extricates the subject from the need to elaborate the current theme of attention or to react to it because it deprives the theme of its affective force. (2) Reflexive noticing of changes in the focus of attention (meditation) is the sufficient cause to induce this effect (mindfulness). In other words, mindfulness is when the affective force is stopped by reflexive noticing.[5] What I suggest is that Nyanaponika condensed into a simple definition what in reality is a causal relation between meditation and mindfulness. 'Bare attention' is a fitting designation of meditation because the meditator does not do anything more than *just* to register the changes in the focus of attention. Importantly, she can avoid any other reaction and thus keeps her attention 'bare' only because this meditative registering deprives objects of attention of their affective force. Nyanaponika's definition presupposes this effect of meditation on attention but he does not explain the key relation between attention and affective force.

(B) Nyanaponika's characterization of mindfulness as a return to the initial stage of the perceptual process can be qualified as a return to the moment of deciding which one of the combatting affective forces will become the theme of attention. But again, it is a necessary consequence of the reflexive noticing of the changes in the focus of attention that the mind opens itself anew to coming stimuli. Thus, Nyanaponika states this effect of meditation correctly but without designating the exact cause thereof.

(C) The above-defined term 'receptivity' can be a more specific way of understanding Nyanaponika's talk about the cleansing of attention. By extricating attention from its present theme, mindfulness also extricates attention for that moment from the active and passive schemes and patterns that influenced selection of that theme. Thus, it makes space for stimuli that were not favoured by these tendencies to capture attention. In other words, mindfulness heightens sensitivity towards the stimuli that have so far remained on the margin of the attentional field.

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5 This does not rule out that the spreading of affective force can be stopped by other means than meditation, but it is called mindfulness only if it is caused by reflexive noticing.

4. The Critique of Bare Attention Revised

If we interpret the definition of mindfulness as bare attention in this way, it can be defended against the criticism expounded above.

All critics agree that mindfulness cannot be bare attention, because 'bare' is at most the automatic turning of attention to an object. If mindfulness is a quality of attention that is established by meditation, i.e. by deliberate reflexive attention, it cannot be identical to the passive turn to an object that belongs to every attention. While this argument seems undeniable, it actually conceals important differences. First, this simple distinction neglects the more important difference between automatic turn of attention to an object and automatic reflexive turn to an experience. Nyanaponika does not claim that mindfulness is associated with the bare turning of attention to any object. As was explained above, mindfulness is rather the immediate effect of the reflexive noticing of changes in the focus of attention. Secondly, during meditation, attention is focused on changes in the focus of attention and the noticing itself of each particular change is sufficient to extricate attention from the current affective context. It is, therefore, the automatic turning of reflexive attention that induces mindfulness. In other words, mindfulness arises during meditation spontaneously; the meditation instructions merely create the circumstances in which this spontaneous event takes place more often — because these instructions induce its sufficient cause.

For these reasons, it is also problematic to assert that 'bare attention', in the sense of non-elaborative attention, is merely an instruction for beginners. In fact, it is an effect of an event in the field of attention, a spontaneous effect induced by the deliberate following of meditation instructions.

Nonetheless, it is true that from the Buddhist point of view the cultivation of mindfulness reflects only the beginning of a long-term meditation practice, namely the part of practice that is not focused on reaching insight into the nature of experience but on the strengthening of attention. The critics of bare attention are undoubtedly correct when they emphasize that the progress of meditation to insight cannot be explained by mindful attention alone. But by just interpreting mindfulness only as a means of gaining insight, they skip the transformation that takes place in the mind already in this initial phase of meditation practice.

To sum up, the critique of Nyanaponika's definition misses its target because it takes the term 'bare attention' too literally instead of first

explaining the event that Nyanaponika attempts to capture by this notion.

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the definitions of mindfulness that the above-mentioned critics offer as an alternative to bare attention.

Dreyfus (2011) defines mindfulness as observation that stabilizes attention by enhancing the ability of the mind to retain information about the object that the attention is no longer focused on. But this is problematic for at least two reasons. (1) Even if we granted that meditation strengthens working memory, as Dreyfus suggests, it does not follow that it is an effect of mindful observation. It could be caused by other factors present in meditation, e.g. by concentration that is, indeed, also strengthened by meditation. (2) It is true that retention plays a role in meditation: the attention focused reflexively on the fact that an object has just become its theme would be impossible if the mind did not retain this object in working memory. But as indicated above, the functioning of working memory can hardly explain how meditation undoes suffering-inducing habits before the meditator reaches the insight.

Further, Dreyfus illustrates mindfulness with the watchman metaphor. The watchman's attention is broadened on the whole attentional field and thus ready to capture any particular object that might appear. But, again, explaining mindfulness as the watchman's attention rather conflates and confuses two quite different mental states. This broadened attention is nothing more than a very wide theme of attention that can encompass indistinctly many particular things. However, the broadening of attention caused by mindfulness does not consist in a wider focus; but rather in better receptivity towards the context and margin of attention. Accordingly, anybody can make her focus broader or narrower at will; but the increase in receptivity is a spontaneous result of meditation practice. Thus, a broader focus of attention and an increase in sensitivity towards the margin of attention are two absolutely different things.

Bodhi (2011) defines mindfulness as lucid and vivid awareness. But, once again, it is the idea of mindfulness as a means of achieving liberating knowledge that inspired such a characterization. It is not difficult to provide a counter-example of mindful attention that is neither lucid nor vivid. When the meditator notices a certain feeling, it is often the case that she is only dimly aware of what exactly this feeling is. After further observation, she becomes aware of more of its qualities and the feeling becomes clearer. However, already the initial

noticing of a nascent feeling can be accompanied by an awareness of this feeling having been perceived. A great degree of clarity and distinctness is thus not necessary for the reflexive turn of attention. To notice that attention has just turned itself to a particular object requires merely a certain 'access measure' of clarity. Thus, it is not at all necessary for the meditator to know what she is actually experiencing. All in all, as the receptivity towards the margin of attention increases thanks to progress in meditation, 'things' very unclear and indistinct become themes of attention, which ordinarily, outside of meditation, we tend to pass over.

And finally, Olendzki (2011) defines mindfulness as equanimity, i.e. an even-minded attitude towards objects of attention. However, identifying mindfulness with equanimity does not seem to contradict the theory of mindful attention as expounded above. It would be more accurate to say rather that equanimity is an affective disposition that arises thanks to mindfulness. By stopping the spreading of the affective force through the mind, mindfulness, for a moment, brings about a distance from the stimulus that captured attention. As this distance arises towards all noticed objects, mindfulness induces the same attitude regardless of the content of the object of attention. The ability to adopt the same attitude of a slight distance to any stimulus is, in my view, the definition of equanimity. Thus, mindfulness is a mental event that leads to the emergence of equanimity as a stable attitude. And equanimity is a long-term disposition to establish mindfulness (but also other mental episodes such as feeling compassion). Olendzki thus identified two elements that are in fact in the relation of a disposition (stable attitude) and its manifestation in a particular mental event.

5. Conclusion

The paper argues that all three points by which Nyanaponika (2005) specifies his definition of mindfulness can be defended if we explicate them in terms of the phenomenological model of attention. In particular, this defence of bare attention is based on clarifying mindfulness by means of the concept of affective force. Mindfulness is a mental event of stopping the spreading of affective force through the mind. Accordingly, observing the emergence and disappearance of objects of attention constitutes a sufficient cause for establishing mindfulness. The phenomenological model of attention also makes it easier to grasp conceptually the indirect increase in sensitivity towards finer stimuli,

which accompanies the practice of meditation. It is the receptivity to stimuli in the context and on the margin of attention. This receptivity must be distinguished from a broadened attention, which is sometimes mistakenly considered to be identical to mindfulness.

To sum up, the definition of mindfulness as 'bare attention' is far from being an instruction for beginners as its current critics suggest. However, when interpreting this definition, we cannot take its author literally. Rather, it is necessary to reconstruct the approach to meditation that this definition expresses. Nyanaponika took seriously the idea that meditation transforms the mind already before the meditator reaches the insight into the nature of experience, and therefore it changes the mind independently of comprehension. It seems to me that the critics of bare attention downplay the possibility that mindfulness is not only a means of achieving knowledge.

It is also possible that the critique of bare attention was motivated by the concern that mindfulness meditation lifted out of the Buddhist context might lose its spiritual dimension. If meditation ceases to be a means of attaining insight into the impermanence of all things, will it not become merely an instrument of enhancing attention that can be used for any purpose? Without wishing to underestimate this risk, I do not think that disconnecting meditation from its original goal means a complete loss of its spirituality. Since bare attention can stop the influence of stimuli on the mind, meditation is already at this stage a liberating and transforming practice.

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