

“The Nature of Mindfulness
and
Its Role in Buddhist Meditation”

A Correspondence between B. Alan Wallace and the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi
Winter, 2006

AW 1: Dear Bhante,

I would first like to tell you how much I respect and appreciate the wonderful work you have done in translating the Buddha’s words and clarifying them for the modern world. You are truly an inspiration.

The reason I am writing you now is to ask you about the meaning of sati in authoritative, pre-twentieth-century Pāli/Theravāda sources. As you well know, in the current Vipassana tradition as it has been widely propagated in the West, sati is more or less defined as “bare attention,” or the moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises in the present moment. There is no doubt that the cultivation of such mindfulness is very helpful, but, strangely enough, I have found no evidence in traditional Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan sources to support this definition of sati (*smṛti*, *dran pa*). Having looked in the Nikāyas, the *Milindapañha*, *Visuddhimagga*, *Abhidharmakośa*, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, and various Tibetan Buddhist texts, I find that they are all in general agreement with this definition from Buddhaghosa:

“By means of it they [i.e., other mental processes] remember, or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering, thus it is sati. Its characteristic is not floating; its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding or the state of being face to face with an object; its basis is strong noting or the close applications of mindfulness of the body and so on. It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being set in the object, and as like a gatekeeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on.”
(*Visuddhimagga*, XIV, 141)

And this one from Nāgasena:

Sati has the has both the characteristic of “calling to mind” and the characteristic of “taking hold.” He explained further, “sati, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts; sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies.”
(*Milindapañha* 37-38)

Not to mention this from the Buddha himself:

“And what monks, is the faculty of sati? Here, monks, the noble disciple has sati, he is endowed with perfect sati and intellect, he is one who remembers, who recollects what was done and said long before.” (Saṃyutta-Nikāya V 197-8)

But nowhere have I found any authoritative source that equates sati with bare attention.

Of course this passage from Udāna is well known and often cited: “In the seen there is only the seen; in the heard, there is only the heard; in the sensed, there is only the sensed; in the mentally perceived, there is only the mentally perceived.” But this does not suggest that sati is equivalent with such bare attention, only that such attention is one valuable application of sati.

With your great erudition in the Pāli canon and Theravada commentarial literature, would you kindly let me know of authoritative sources that do equate sati with bare attention, and if so how they relate to the sources I have cited above?

Apart from the issue of definitions alone, I am concerned that Buddhist vipassanā practice is not only being radically simplified for the general lay public (some would say “dumbed down”), but that it is being misrepresented in such a way that the rich teachings (in theory & practice) of the Satipaṭṭhānasutta are being overlooked or marginalized.

Again, I defer to your much greater knowledge of the Pāli literature and am eager to learn from you. By the way, I’m delighted to read that you were ordained by the Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, under whom I also trained for a few months in 1980. This was a rare privilege, and I have ever since regarded him as my primary teacher of Theravada Buddhism.

Respectfully yours,
B. Alan Wallace

AW 2: Dear Ven. Bodhi,

Thank you so much for your gracious and detailed response to my inquiry about *sati*. I’ve learned a lot from your account, but it also inspires me to follow up on your comments so that I can continue to clarify my understanding.

BB 1: Dear Alan,

Thank you for your email. I have heard much of your work, too, and in fact, years ago, I had read aloud your book, *Choosing Reality*, to the German monk Ven. Nyanaponika, whom I had the privilege of living with and caring for during the last ten years of his life. During his last four years he was almost blind and thus, in the evenings, I would read aloud to him for about an hour, and your book was one of the books that I read for him. I

would also record the books I read so he could listen to them again during the day, and thus, I believe, he heard your book twice.

AW 2: I'm honored that the Ven. Nyanaponika found it worthwhile to listen to the reading of my book, and that you took the time to read it for him. I first began to seriously study and practice Dharma while living in Germany in 1970-71, and his book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* was the most instructive manual I came across to guide me in meditation. So I remain indebted to him, like so many other Western students of Buddhадharma.

BB 1: We had also been indirectly connected in a conversation, over twenty years ago, concerning the benefits of the monastic life. Roger Wheeler was the one who connected us. He had sent me a tape you made, c. 1983, in which, on one side, you criticized Christopher Titmuss for his view that Dharma is all about practice and has nothing to do with "views," and on the other side Stephen Batchelor for his view that monasticism will necessarily play a marginal role in the development of Western Buddhism. I appreciated your positions on both sides of the tape. Often, when I met a Western monk who inclined towards Titmuss's view, I would play side A of the tape for him; when I met one who leaned towards Batchelor's view, I would play side B.

AW 2: I'm delighted that I could be of some service to you in upholding the theory and practice of the Dharma. I still hold to the views I expressed then, showing how tenaciously I cling to my opinions!

BB 1: I didn't know that you had some connection with my dear ordination teacher Ven. Ananda Maitreya. I saw Ven. Ananda Maitreya just a month before his death, in June 1998, which was only two months short of his 102nd birthday. His mind was completely clear and his body was fit and full of energy. He could walk well without any need for a walking stick. He gave a monk-friend of mine and myself a splendid talk on insight meditation. He had just returned from a trip to Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore. His only complaint was of persistent phlegm in the lungs. It turned out that this phlegm was the beginning of pneumonia. About a week after I met him we heard that he was admitted to the hospital. From this point on his condition deteriorated until he passed away on July 18th. At the time of his funeral the entire road from Colombo to Balangoda, along which his casket passed, was lined with yellow flags honoring him, and the town of Balangoda itself was a blaze of yellow and orange banners with inscriptions praising him. He was given a state funeral and thousands upon thousands of people came to pay their last respects to him. It was deeply moving.

AW 2: I wish I could have witnessed this stirring event. I heard that he was one of the Theravada elders who greeted the Dalai Lama when he first came to India for the Buddha-jayanti in 1957. This made me feel especially close to him, for I received my full ordination from HH the Dalai Lama in 1975. I spent just a few months under the Ven. Ananda Maitreya's guidance at his home temple in Udamulla in 1981. There were only two other Western students there with him, and I felt the great privilege of being in his presence and being trained by him in retreat as I practiced samatha.

BB 2: Sri Nandaramaya in Udamulla was my ordination temple, and home temple, during the first two and a half years of my life as a monk. I suppose you were staying in the “German kuti,” the sturdy spacious kuti built for a German monk named Kondañña who was there when I arrived in early November 1972. This was located on a small spur beneath the mound on which the Bodhi tree and Buddha hall were situated. Ven. Ananda Maitreya’s kuti, at the time, was on the top of the hill on the other side of the *pansala* (the main temple), and my kuti was beneath his on the slope of the same hill. When I visited the temple after my return to Sri Lanka in 1982, I went to see my old kuti, but all that was left was an impression on the ground where the foundation had stood. The kuti had been built of dried mud and straw, so it could not withstand the fury of the elements. I wonder who the two Western students were that stayed with him in 1981. When I visited in 1982, the MNT was overseas (in England or the U.S.) and there weren’t any Westerners at the temple. Ven. Nandasāra was there (I knew him as a young novice) and he has been in charge of the temple since the MNT’s passing.

BB 1: Now for your question. If this were a court of law, I might have to excuse myself, since the expression “bare attention” was, I believe, coined by Ven. Nyanaponika, whom I regard as my closest *kalyāṇamitta* in my life as a monk. But since this is only a correspondence, I won’t hesitate to defend its use, not out of feelings of loyalty towards the great elder, but because I believe that it does accurately represent one aspect of *sati*. I should add that Ven. Nyanaponika himself did not regard “bare attention” as capturing the complete significance of *satipaṭṭhāna*, but as representing only one phase, the initial phase, in the meditative development of right mindfulness. He held that in the proper practice of right mindfulness, *sati* has to be integrated with *sampajañña*, clear comprehension, and it is only when these two work together that right mindfulness can fulfill its intended purpose.

AW 2: Ah, this is very interesting. On the basis of my studies, I can easily accept the assertion that bare attention represents one aspect, or *application*, of *sati*, and that it represents an initial phase in the development of right mindfulness.

BB 1: Now for the meaning of *sati*: You no doubt are aware that in Indian psychology generally, apart from Buddhism, Skt *smṛti* means memory. In attempting to find a terminology adequate to his own system, the Buddha necessarily had to draw upon the vocabulary available to him. For some reason, he picked up this word *smṛti*, or in Pāli *sati* (presumably the same in other Middle Indo Aryan dialects), and gave it a new meaning congruent with his own system of psychology and meditation. Strangely, in the definition of the *satindriya* at SN 48:9, we find the definition cast in terms of the old meaning of memory (as you quote it). But if one looks in the next sutta, SN 48:10, one finds two definitions of the *satindriya* superimposed: first comes the one in terms of memory, then comes the stock formula for the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. This suggests that the Buddha, or (more likely) the compilers of the texts, weren’t satisfied with the simple definition in terms of memory but felt compelled to supplement it with a definition that brings out its meaning in the context of Buddhist contemplative practice. Then, in the next sutta (48:11), the question is raised: “What is the faculty of

mindfulness?” And the answer is given: “The mindfulness that one obtains on the basis of the four satipaṭṭhānas.” Here, mindfulness as memory doesn’t seem appropriate at all.

AW 2: Quite so.

BB 1: The definition that you give from the Visuddhimagga, as you cite it, is somewhat biased by the translation. If one looks at the Pāli, one will see that all the Vism does, actually, is take the noun *sati* and define it by way of verbs and action nouns related to the same substantive noun: *saranti tāya, sayam vā sarati, saraṇamattam eva vā esā ti sati*. This could just as well have been rendered: “By it they are mindful; or it itself is mindful; or it is just being mindful: thus it is mindfulness.” This definition would be just as fitting—in relation to the practice of meditation even more fitting—than the one in terms of remembering.

AW: This is very illuminating—thank you!

BB 1: My arguments have still been fairly indirect, but I now want to propose a more direct solution to this problem. There is one word often used in relation to *sati* which, I think, gives evidence of an attempt to ascribe a new meaning to the old word. This word is Pāli *upaṭṭhāna* (Skt *upasthāna*). The word is closely connected with *sati*, and indeed the best known compound involving *sati* is comprised of *sati* and this word: *satipaṭṭhāna* (in my notes to the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* I present reasons for preferring a derivation of the compound from *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna* to a derivation from *sati* + *paṭṭhāna*; Skt in fact has *smṛtyupasthāna*). The word *upaṭṭhāna* has the sense of “presence, standing near, attendance upon.” It seems this word was chosen because it conveys the impact that the practice of *sati* has upon its objective domain: it makes the objective domain present to the mind, makes it “stand near” the mind, makes it appear clearly before the mind. One might even ascribe *upaṭṭhāna* to the subjective rather than the objective side of the experience: it is the mind’s activity of attending to the object, the awareness of the object. *Upaṭṭhāna* can also mean “setting up,” and this is what one does with mindfulness. One who is mindful is described as *upaṭṭhitassati*: “one with mindfulness set up.” The meditator who has assumed the right meditation posture “sets up mindfulness before him” (*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*).

AW 2: If you equate *sati* with (1) the mind’s activity of attending to the object or (2) to the awareness of the object, I find it difficult to distinguish it from (1) attention, or mental engagement (Skt *manaskāra*), and from (2) consciousness, or awareness (Skt *viññāna*). Consider the following description of *sati*:

“Sati, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts.... Sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful.” [*Milindapañha* 37–38]

Here the explanation of *sati* is far more than taking the noun *sati* and defining it by way of verbs and action nouns related to the same substantive noun. Prior to the exercise of the mental factors of *sampajañña* and *paññā*, *sati* appears in the above account to express a kind of discerning awareness that distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, preparing the yogi to cultivate the former and abandon the latter. One of the most disturbing trends I've seen in the modern Vipassana tradition is a kind of ethical neutrality that acknowledges no significant difference between wholesome and unwholesome mental states and rejects any attempt to favor one kind of mental process over another. "Nonjudgmentally accept every aspect of yourself" is a refrain I've heard time and again, and on multiple levels this is fundamentally at variance with the whole of the Buddha's teachings.

BB 2: I'm puzzled by the definition of *sati* in the *Milindapañha*. I haven't come across such a definition in the suttas, though the Atthasālinī, the commentary to the first book of the Abhidhamma, quotes this very passage as illustrating the meaning of *sati*. This explanation of *sati*, on the other hand, seems to correspond very closely to an explanation of *yoniso manasikāra*, "careful attention," in its role as the "nutriment" for the arising of the "discrimination of phenomena factor of enlightenment" (*dhammavicaya-sambojjhaṅga*):

There are, monks, wholesome and unwholesome mental states, blamable and blameless mental states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright mental states with their counterparts: frequently giving careful attention to them is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of discrimination of mental states and for the fulfillment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of discrimination of mental states.

In case you wonder what the sutta has to say about the "nutriment" for the arising and fulfillment of the mindfulness enlightenment factor, the answer is somewhat ambiguous:

There are, bhikkhus, things that are the basis for the enlightenment factor of mindfulness: frequently giving careful attention to them is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness and for the fulfillment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness.

Sati should be distinguished from *manasikāra*, which, in the Pāli Abhidhamma, is understood to be the mental function that steers the mind towards an object. It is explained as advertence to an object. "Its characteristic is making run, its function is to connect the associated states upon the object, its manifestation is the directing towards the object, it should be seen as the charioteer of the associated states because of conducting them towards the object" (*so sāraṇalakkhaṇo, sampayuttānaṃ ārammaṇe sampayojanaraso, ārammaṇābhimukhabhāva-paccupaṭṭhāno, saikhārakkhandhapariyāpanno. ārammaṇapaṭipādakattena sampayuttānaṃ sārathi viya daṭṭhabbo*). In other contexts *manasikāra* seems to have a different meaning, similar to reflection or consideration (as in *yoniso manasikāra*). But as a particular mental factor, it is the factor that directs the mind to the object.

This is what the Atthasālinī has to say about the “faculty of *sati*” (apart from quoting Mil):

It is a faculty in the sense of exercising dominance by overcoming forgetfulness. Or it is a faculty in that it exercises rulership in the characteristic of presence (*upaṭṭhānalakkhaṇe*). Mindfulness itself as a faculty is the faculty of mindfulness. But this has the characteristic of non-superficiality (*apilāpanalakkhaṇā*) and the characteristic of taking up (*upaggaṇhanalakkhaṇā*). ... [Here comes a simile of the treasurer and the king, followed by the quote from *Milindapañha*.] ... Another method: Mindfulness has the characteristic of non-superficiality, the function of not-forgetting, the manifestation as guarding, or manifestation as confrontation with the objective domain (*visayābhimukhībhāva*). Its proximate cause is firm perception, or its proximate cause is the establishment of mindfulness of the body and so forth (= all four satipaṭṭhānas). It should be regarded like a post because of being firmly established in the object; and like a doorman because of guarding the doors of the senses.

The word translated as “non-superficiality” (*apilāpanatā*) is explained in the commentaries to mean literally “non-floating” in the sense of “entering deeply into its object.” It is said that whereas a mind without mindfulness “floats” on the surface of its object the way a gourd floats on water, mindfulness sinks into its object the way a stone placed on the surface of water sinks to the bottom (from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi Mālaṭīkā*).

I understand your exasperation with the tendency, in the “neo-Vipassana movement,” to adopt (as you put it) “a kind of ethical neutrality that acknowledges no significant difference between wholesome and unwholesome mental states and rejects any attempt to favor one kind of mental process over another.” I agree this is quite foreign to the whole tenor of the Buddha’s teaching. In fact, I doubt very much that there is such a thing as “bare attention” in the sense of mindfulness completely devoid of ethical evaluation and purposive direction. In the actual development of right mindfulness, as I understand it, *sammā sati* must always be guided in right view, steered by right intention, grounded in the three ethical factors, and cultivated in conjunction with *sammā vāyāma*, right effort; right effort necessarily presupposes the distinction of mental states into the unwholesome and the wholesome.

I recall that when Ven. Nyanaponika would read statements about “bare attention” as interpreted by some of the neo-Vipassana teachers, he would sometimes shake his head and say, in effect, “But that’s not what I meant at all!” I remember many years ago I meditated at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre. At the end of the corridor where I did walking meditation there was a sign that read, “Allow whatever arises.” Whenever I walked towards the sign and it came into my field of vision, I would always think of the Buddha’s saying, “Here, a monk does not tolerate an arisen thought of sensual desire ... ill-will ... cruelty ... or any other arisen unwholesome state, but abandons it, eliminates it, and completely dispels it.” I was tempted to replace the sign there with one that had this saying, but fortunately I resisted the temptation. If I had been discovered, I might have been expelled.

AW 2: As you probably know, among Buddhist traditions, I am most familiar with Tibetan Buddhism, which follows the Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna*, translating this literally as “*dran pa nye bar gzhaḡ pa*,” for which the literal English literal translation is “the close application of mindfulness.” The sense of this, as I understand it, is that the *sati* one *develops* in the practice of *samādhi* is then *applied* in the *vipassanā* practices of the four *smṛtyupasthāna*. Is this incompatible with the Pāli tradition?

BB 2: In the Pāli tradition it could be said that *samādhi* is developed on the basis of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, at least selectively. In one text (MN 44), the four *satipaṭṭhānas* are called the *samādhinimitta*, which I think means the bases of *samādhi* (not “*nimittas*” in the sense of the visualized objects, such as the *kaṣiṇa-nimittas*). Certain meditation subjects among the *satipaṭṭhānas* can be seen as avenues to *samādhi*, e.g., mindfulness of breathing and the meditation on the parts of the body. One who adopts this approach to *samādhi* will also have to employ, in the early stages, the *dharmānupassanā* exercise of being aware of the five hindrances, their presence, absence, and the means to prevent them from arising. One can use *sati* within the above-mentioned subjects to develop powerful *samādhi*, to the level of *jhāna*, and then take up the practice of *vipassanā* by moving into the *dharmānupassanā* phase of contemplating the five aggregates, their arising and passing away. In this way, one practices *satipaṭṭhāna* in a style that uses *samatha* as preliminary to the development of *vipassanā*. Alternatively, one can begin with *sati* extended over the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, perhaps using *ānāpānasati* as a “root object,” but letting the mindfulness take in any object that presents itself through any sense base. Once the concentration becomes moderately strong, one can focus upon the contemplation of the four elements, and from there move into the contemplation of the five aggregates. By this route one moves into the *vipassanā*-knowledges more quickly, but without the benefit of the strong *samādhi* developed in the former approach. The former approach is said to be that of the *samathayānika*, one who uses *samatha* as a “vehicle” for the practice. The latter is that of the *vipassanāyānika*, or *suddhavipassanāyānika*, one who uses bare insight as the vehicle.

BB 1: There is a work called the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, an analytical text of the Theravāda school that was composed sometime during the Abhidhamma period but found its way into the Sutta Piṭaka (probably because it uses a non-Abhidharmic method of exegesis). In this work, the different “*dhammas*” are analyzed according to their characteristic qualities. The quality that is used to characterize *sati*, again and again, is *upaṭṭhāna*. Here is one typical passage from among many, this one on the *indriyas*:

Saddhindriyaṃ dhammo, viriyindriyaṃ dhammo, satindriyaṃ dhammo, samādhindriyaṃ dhammo, paññindriyaṃ dhammo. Adhimokkhaṭṭho attho, paggaḡaṭṭho attho, upaṭṭhānaṭṭho attho, avikkhepaṭṭho attho, dassanaṭṭho attho.

“The faith faculty is a dhamma, the energy faculty is a dhamma, **the mindfulness faculty is a dhamma**, the concentration faculty is a dhamma, the wisdom faculty is a dhamma. Their respective meanings are: the meaning of resolution, the meaning of exertion, **the meaning of presence**, the meaning of non-distraction, the meaning of seeing.”

Thus we see that in this period, the expositors sought to define the faculty of mindfulness by way of *upaṭṭhāna* because mindfulness makes the object present to the mind, or because mindfulness is the act of attending to the object, the awareness of the object.

AW 2: Might an alternate reading of the same phrase, *upaṭṭhānaṭṭho attho* be that *sati* has “the meaning of close application”? This is how I would read the equivalent phrase in Tibetan. I’m surprised that in the above text, *samādhi* is said to have the meaning of non-distraction, for in the Sanskrit sources I’ve seen, non-distraction is more commonly associated with mindfulness. The *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, for instance, defines mindfulness as “the non-forgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the function of non-distraction.” And the *Abhidharmakośa* defines it as not losing the object of the mind.

BB 2: The Dhammasaṅgaṇi Mālaṭīkā explains *upaṭṭhāna*, in relation to *sati*, thus (this is an attempt at verbal etymology): “Having approached (*upagantvā*) as an object what was done long ago and so forth, it is a position/station (*ṭhāna* = Skt *sthāna*); or it is the non-letting go of an object.” The Paṭisambhidāmagga-Aṭṭhakathā says: “*Upaṭṭhāna* means standing firmly having arrived at the object” (*upaṭṭhānaṭṭho ti ārammaṇaṃ upecca patitṭhānaṭṭho*). From this, we can deduce that these commentaries see *sati* as involving firm presence of mind in relation to the object, and this firm presence entails a capacity for clear recollection of past experiences.

I did a search on *avikkhepa*, non-distraction, through the canon and commentaries. I find the word occurs on several occasions in the canon, but without explanation. It is paired with *paggaha*, which means exertion, and is considered a synonym for *virīya*, so the two can be taken to represent the pair of concentration and energy. *Avikkhepa* occurs very often in later works included in the canon, the Niddesa and the Paṭisambhidāmagga. These two works represent the distinctive Theravādin exegetical system, in a very early phase, and here *avikkhepa* is clearly included within a set of synonyms for *samādhi*. I’m wondering if there might not be a simple semantic problem here, since Theravāda commentaries also explain *sati* as non-forgetfulness with regard to the object (*asammōsana*), or as the “guarding” (*ārakkha*) of the object, and this would be conducive to non-distraction, which is the *samādhi* that arises from continuous application of *sati*.

BB 1: Turning to sūta texts, although we don’t find a formal definition of *sati* in terms of “bare attention,” if we consider *how sati* is to be practiced, we would find considerable support for this idea. Take as an example the very beginning of the section on mindfulness of breathing in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (identical with the instructions on mindfulness of breathing elsewhere). When the meditator sits down, holds his body erect, and establishes mindfulness in front of him, “just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out” (*sato va assasati sato passasati*). Now here mindfulness could not mean “remembering,” i.e., “just remembering, he breathes in, remembering, he breathes out.” That is exactly what he is not supposed to be doing, i.e., he shouldn’t allow his mind to drift away among memories of the past. In the following description of the exercise, it is said that when a monk breathes in and out long he knows, “I breathe in and out long,”

and so for short breaths, etc. Here, the key word is *pajānāti*, “one knows.” This suggests the presence of *paññā* (the noun related to *pajānāti*), but I don’t think at this point *paññā* is present as the “wisdom that penetrates the true characteristics of phenomena.” This is simply a bare cognition of the quality of the breath. Mindfulness, as bare attention, makes the quality of the breath present to the meditator’s mind--this is *upaṭṭhāna*--and then a very simple cognition of the quality takes place registering that quality: this is indicated by *pajānāti*. Mindfulness, though operating in a simple mode as “bare attention,” doesn’t occur alone, in isolation from other mental functions. One such mental function with which it is conjoined is *sampajañña*, and here we might say that *sampajañña* operates as the simple knowing of the quality of the breath. In commentarial terms, this would be *gocara-sampajañña*, clear comprehension of the meditation object.

AW 2: I agree with you that in the samatha practice of mindfulness of breathing in preparation for the *vipassanā* practices of *satipaṭṭhāna*, *paññā* is not present as the “wisdom that penetrates the true characteristics of phenomena.” Rather, sati is closely applied (*upaṭṭhāna*) to the breathing for the sake of developing *samādhi*, not *paññā*. Thereafter, it is discerningly applied to the body and so on with the intent to penetrate the true characteristics of those phenomena.

I believe there may be a significant difference between the Pāli and Sanskrit Buddhist meanings of *sampajañña* and its Sanskrit equivalent. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, for example, states, “In brief, this alone is the definition of introspection: the repeated examination of the state of one’s body and mind. [V: 108.] But some Pāli sources suggest a similar meaning: “‘No excitement concerning these five cords of sensual pleasure arises in me on any occasion,’ then he understands: ‘Desire and lust for the five cords of sensual pleasure are abandoned in me.’ In this way he has introspection of that.” [*Majjhima Nikāya* 122, 15]. I believe sati is sufficient for simply knowing of the quality of the breath, as indicated in the above citation from the *Milindapañha*.

BB 2: As to Śāntideva’s use of the word, I would have to take a look at the section on *samprajanya* in *Sikṣāsamuccaya*, which I have back in New Jersey, but only in English translation. I couldn’t get the Sanskrit original (issued in the now rare Mithila Institute series of Buddhist Skt texts). Did you consult this? Sometimes single lines of verse are not sufficient to draw major conclusions.

But even in the Pāli suttas we find different explanations of *sampajañña*. In many suttas we find it explained as exercising *sampajañña* in the various activities: “When going forward and returning, when looking up and looking to the side, when bending and stretching, etc.” This corresponds to Śāntideva’s introspection regarding the state of one’s body. Then we find: “And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu exercise clear comprehension? Here, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu feelings are understood as they arise, understood as they remain present, understood as they pass away. Thoughts are understood as they arise, understood as they remain present, understood as they pass away. Perceptions are understood as they arise, understood as they remain present, understood as they pass away. It is in this way, bhikkhus, that a bhikkhu exercises clear comprehension” (SN 47:35). This corresponds to Śāntideva’s introspection regarding the state of one’s mind.

AW 3: I haven't consulted *Sikṣāsamuccaya* in this regard, only the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

BB 1: In the later exercises, say in the contemplation of the five hindrances under *dhammānupassanā*, I would say that it is mindfulness as bare attention that is being exercised when one knows the presence (or absence) of sensual desire, ill will, and so forth. When mindfulness in this function has performed its work, then *paññā* steps in to exercise the more prominent role of understanding how the hindrances arise, how they are abandoned, and how they can be prevented from arising in the future.

AW 2: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta I have the impression that sati and *paññā* function concurrently, rather than sequentially. As one closely applies mindfulness to the examination of the elements of origination, presence, and dissolution of various phenomena, mindfulness, I believe, has the function of "calling to mind" and "following the course" of these events (cf. *Milindapañha*) without distraction, while *paññā* has the function of penetrating their characteristics. Is that interpretation compatible with the authoritative commentaries?

BB 2: It is certainly the case that sati and *paññā* can function concurrently. I think in the earlier stages sati prepares the way for *paññā* (though *paññā* would also be present in the form of right view and as an incipient understanding), but once the opening occurs for *paññā* to operate as the direct insight into the true characteristics of phenomena, sati continues alongside it.

BB 1: In the general instructions that accompany each of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* in the sutta, it is said, "Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful (*satimā*), having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world" (and so for feelings, etc.). What can mindfulness be here? Not memory of the past, but clear awareness of the present, full attention to the present. I think within the individual exercises described in the sutta, at certain points mindfulness as "bare attention" takes on a dominant role, and then, when the object attended to comes clearly into focus, bare attention becomes supplemented by "wise attention," which culminates in *paññā*. This occurs when the object is scrutinized and comprehended by means of *sampajañña*, particularly (among the four types of *sampajañña* described by the commentaries) by means of *asammoha-sampajañña*, clear comprehension as non-delusion.

AW 2: For the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, I've seen a slightly different translation of the above passage, namely, "a monk dwells contemplating the body *as* the body," which I believe makes more sense. But if this translation is valid, the mindfulness being applied here is not "bare," but is rather enriched with a sound understanding of the classes of phenomena one is examining and of the Buddhist views expounded in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It's quite true that in these practices one should not slip into memories of the past, but, frankly, I don't see how a meditator can apply bare attention to all the body parts that are listed in the teachings on mindfulness of the body. Surely one must call on one's powers

of imagination and not just bare attention to call to mind specific vital organs and other more subtle elements of the body.

BB 2: I would question the translation of *kāye kāyānupassī viharati* as “he dwells contemplating the body as a body.” I think that idea would have been expressed differently. Nevertheless, to contemplate the body *in the body* requires a sharper exercise of discernment even than to contemplate the body *as* a body. At this point I’m not sure that “bare attention” would be a satisfactory expression to use to characterize mindfulness as it is applied in such exercises as contemplation of the thirty-two parts, the elements, and the decay of the body contemplations. It seems more satisfactory in relation to the system taught by Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw, which begins with observation of the rise and fall of the abdomen, and then extends “noting” to anything that occurs within one’s immediate experience. So I would say “bare attention” (which must be understood as a metaphorical term, since no attention is ever truly bare of elements of direction and evaluation) is dominant in certain practices and in certain phases of complex systems of practice; “reflective attention”--sati working in conjunction with vitakka and vicāra, is more prominent in other exercises (the preparatory phases of the 32 parts, the four elements meditation, the charnel ground meditations); and “integrated wise attention”--sati conjoined with paññā--becomes more prominent.

BB 1: In conclusion, I would say that the suttas do not give us a formal definition of *sati* that enables us to clearly differentiate it from *sati* as memory, but rather an *operational demonstration* that indicates, in practical terms, how its role in Buddhist meditative practice differs from that of memory. Certain definitions (as in the example of the *satindriya*) show that the two are not entirely distinct, and thus it would be an interesting theme for inquiry how a word originally meaning “memory” came to mean “attention to the present.” Perhaps the root idea is that to be mindful means “to remember” to pay attention to what is occurring in one’s immediate experience rather than to allow the mind to drift away under the dominion of stray thoughts and tumultuous emotions.

AW 2: Rather than translating *sati* as “memory,” I think it is more accurate to render it as “recollection” or “remembering.” In light of the Buddhist view of cognition consisting of a continuum of finite mind-moments, *sati* entails an ongoing process of remember to remember the object of interest, without forgetfulness (the opposite of recollection). That object may lie in the past, thus conforming to our common notion of memory, which the Buddha acknowledged when he declared that *sati* recollects what was done and said long before [*Samyutta-Nikāya* V 197-8]. Or the object of *sati* may lie in the present, as in the cases you’ve cited. I believe it might even lie in the future, for example, when we remember to do something in the future. This has been called “prospective memory,” and I suspect it is also covered by the term *sati*. This would link the pre-Buddhist meaning of *smṛti* to the ways *sati* is used in Buddhism.

BB 2: I think your explanation of “remembering” provides the link between *sati* in the sense of “remembering what was said and done long ago” and *sati* as “presence in mind” regarding one’s present experience. But the words “remembering” and “remembrance” have become so closely associated, in English, with memory of the past that I don’t think

they would succeed as actual translations of *sati*. “Recollection” works as a translation of “*anussati*,” which, of course, is *anu* + *sati*.

BB 1: I don’t think that admitting *sati* to mean “bare attention” commits one to a “dumbing down” of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. It is true that on the contemporary American Dharma scene, *satipaṭṭhāna* practice has undergone a shift in emphasis, or, more precisely, a change in function. In classical Theravāda Buddhism (and, more widely, in all classical Buddhist practice) the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in order to be *sammā sati*, right mindfulness, has to occur in the context of the full Noble Eightfold Path; that is, it has to be preceded and guided by right view and motivated by right intentions, not to mention that it should be associated with the three ethical factors of the path.

AW 2: When we map the Noble Eightfold Path onto the three trainings, my understanding is that right effort, mindfulness, and *samādhi* are the triad in support of *samādhi*, while right view and right thought are developed in support of *paññā*. Do I have that wrong?

BB 2: First of all, I should state that I recently realized that the common way of dividing up the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path into three categories--repeated so often in popular books on Buddhism (including some that I wrote in my days of juvenile innocence)--occurs *only once* in the four main Nikāyas. Moreover, this one occurrence is in a sutta spoken by the bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā, not in one spoken by the Buddha. True, the discourse is said to have been subsequently approved by the Buddha, but it wasn’t spoken by him; and this method of imprimatur could be the way the Sangha sought to authorize a text composed sometime after the parinibbāna, as I suspect is the case with this one. I now prefer to take the eightfold path as an organic whole. We might be able to isolate the three ethical factors, but the contemplative ones, I believe, should all be taken together, without segregating them rigidly into distinct *samādhi* and *paññā* groups. Particularly with *sammā vāyāma* and *sammā sati*: I believe these run along both tracks: *samādhi* and *paññā*. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-saṃyutta* we find enough suttas that emphasize the role of *satipaṭṭhāna* in leading to *paññā*, not merely to *samādhi*. One example:

“Bhikkhus, those bhikkhus who are newly ordained, not long gone forth, recently come to this Dhamma and Discipline, should be exhorted, settled, and established by you in the development of the four establishments of mindfulness. What four?

“Come, friends, dwell contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, unified, with limpid mind, concentrated, with one-pointed mind, in order to know the body as it really is. Dwell contemplating feelings in feelings ... in order to know feelings as they really are. Dwell contemplating mind in mind ... in order to know mind as it really is. Dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena ... in order to know phenomena as they really are.”

“Bhikkhus, those bhikkhus who are trainees [stream-enterers, etc.], who have not attained their mind’s ideal, who dwell aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage: they too dwell contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, unified, with limpid mind, concentrated, with one-pointed mind, in order to fully understand the body as it really is. They too dwell contemplating feelings in feelings ... in order to fully understand feelings as they really are. They too

dwell contemplating mind in mind ... in order to fully understand mind as it really is. They too dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena ... in order to fully understand phenomena as they really are.”

The four satipaṭṭhānas seem to be a complete system of practice (based upon sammādiṭṭhi and sīla, of course) that can lead all the way to the final goal:

“Bhikkhus, there are these four establishments of mindfulness. What four? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world.

“When, bhikkhus, these four establishments of mindfulness have been developed and cultivated, one of two fruits may be expected: either final knowledge in this very life or, if there is a residue of clinging, the state of nonreturning.”

BB 1: Moreover, to be complete *satipaṭṭhāna* should be a combination of *sati*, energy (*ātāpā* → *virīya*), and clear comprehension (*sampajāno* → *paññā* in its elementary roles). Contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view, or reinterpret right view to make it fit in comfortably with our modernistic modes of understanding; and the attitudes involved in right intentions, particularly those involving a recognition of the vicious nature of *samsāra* and a turn towards release, hardly figure at all. Rather, the practice of mindfulness is undertaken as a way to enable people to enhance their appreciation of the present, to *be* more fully in the here and now, to accept more completely and totally the world with all its vicissitudes and uncertainties. Thus we get books like “Wherever You Are, There You Are” (which I haven’t read, I know only the title) or even Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea of enjoying an orange while one mindfully eats it. In a way, this is almost the converse of the classical function of *sati*, which is to induce “disenchantment” with the here and now. One can see how mindfulness practice could acquire this function as a means to help people overcome the sense of alienation from direct experience that set in as a consequence of the industrial and technological age, with its stress on the conceptual mastery of nature and its subjugation of the natural world to human purposes. But correcting this error might not justify the loss of the purpose originally intended by the Buddha and transmitted within the Buddhist tradition.

AW 2: I heartily agree with all the points you make in the above paragraph. In the sources you cite, Buddhism has been reduced to a kind of therapy to make *samsāra* more enjoyable, rather than a system of theory and practice designed to liberate us from *samsāra*, including all mental afflictions. I am intent on resisting this degradation of the whole Buddhist tradition, and I sense that you share this sentiment.

BB 2: I share the sentiment, but it might be the case that in this present age we should take the attitude: “The Tathāgata has no closed fist of a teacher,” interpreting this statement to mean that we should let others take from Buddhism what they find useful for secular purposes: If psychotherapists can draw upon Buddhist mindfulness practice to help people with mental problems, and this helps the patients: fine. If pain clinicians find Buddhist practice helps patients afflicted with severe pain: fine. If peace activists are inspired by Buddhist ideals of loving-kindness and compassion, and they court the

friendship of the Dalai Lama: fine. If a businessman says the secret to his success in business lies in his Zen practice (or Vipassana practice), and he uses his success to further practice generosity and set a good example to others: fine. If a surgeon draws her inspiration from an image of the Buddha as the “universal physician,” fine. The problem for me only arises when such people say, “This is the Dhamma; this is what it all boils down to: how to be fully here in the present.” In my mind, this way of thinking hasn’t yet even “seen the door” of the Dhamma.

AW 3: I couldn’t agree more!

AW 4: To tie up one loose end, as I commented earlier, insofar as sati is equated with bare attention, or as “the mind’s activity of attending to the object, the awareness of the object,” as you put it, I find it implausible that this mental activity is by nature wholesome, like the other mental factors in that list. Can you tell me the Abhidhamma definition of sati in the context of wholesome mental factors?

BB 4: No problem to try to tie up this “loose end.” First, I used the phrase “the mind’s activity of attending to the object, the awareness of the object” as an attempt to make sense of the word ‘*upaṭṭhāna*,’ which is used in works like the Paṭisambhidāmagga and the commentaries to draw out the significance of sati. It wasn’t a direct “gloss” on sati itself.

As a wholesome mental factor, sati is consistently explained in the same way as in the quotation from Vism XIV 141 (with the forms *saranti*, *sarati*, *sarāṇa*, simply cognates of sati). So I don’t have any new definition of sati to offer. But I hope that I can explain how sati, as “bare attention,” can function as a wholesome mental factor. When I use the word “awareness” or “attention” to render *upaṭṭhāna*, as representing sati in this role (which is just my hypothesis), this awareness is quite different from ordinary consciousness (*viññāṇa*), and this attention is different from *manasikāra*, the mental factor that performs the function of adverting to an object or selecting features of the objective field for closer focus. Sati, as bare attention, is never completely bare. When practiced in the full context of the noble eightfold path (even the path-practice of a worldling) it is, or should be, embraced by other factors of the path, most notably by right view, right motivation, and right effort (factors 1, 2, and 6); it is already supported by the three morality factors (3, 4, 5). As Ven. Nyanaponika first used the expression, sati is “bare” in that it is shorn of our usual emotional reactions, evaluations, judgments, conceptual overlays, etc., and is intended to *lay bare* the experienced object as clearly as possible.

We should remember that sati, in the context of satipaṭṭhāna practice, is always practiced as part of an ‘*anupassanā*,’ and this word helps to bring out the role of sati. We usually translate ‘*anupassanā*’ as “contemplation,” thus ‘*kāyānupassanā*’ as “contemplation of the body,” but this might be somewhat misleading. It might be more accurate, and more literal, to translate it as “observation.” The word is made up of a prefix ‘*anu*’ which suggests repetition, and ‘*passanā*’, which means “seeing, viewing.” So sati is part of a process that involves a close, repetitive observation of the object.

Several factors enter into anupassanā. According to the “satipaṭṭhāna refrain,” these are energy (*ātāpī*, “ardent”), clear comprehension (*sampajāno*), and mindfulness (*satimā*). Energy contributes the strength to fulfill the practice, but it is mindfulness that brings the object into the field of observation, and in many exercises (though not all) it does so simply through the act of attending to the object over and over, as simply as possible, and of attending to each object that presents itself on the successive occasions of experience. Mindfulness, as bare attention, is thus a key element in the process of adopting an “observational stance” towards one’s own experience.

Mindfulness, as bare attention, however, isn’t just floating loosely in a void. In a meditative situation it will be anchored in a primary object, such as in-breathing and out-breathing, or the rise and fall of the abdomen. But whenever some other phenomenon arises and floats into the field of awareness, the meditator is advised to simply note it, without reacting to it, and then to bring the mind back to the primary object. If any reactions take place, such as enjoying the distracting object or feeling irritated by it, one should note the enjoyment or irritation, and again return to the primary object.

Thus, if you have trouble seeing mindfulness—as bare attention—as a wholesome mental factor because it isn’t remembering one’s wholesome qualities or attending to bodhipakkhiya dhammas, the same problem could be posed in terms of mindfulness of breathing. A skeptic might say: “Yeah, I can see loving-kindness meditation, or compassion meditation, as a wholesome state, but mindfulness of breathing, why, you’re doing nothing but following your breath in and out. What could be especially ‘wholesome’ about that?”

In the practice of bare attention, as used in the “dry insight” system of vipassanā, mindfulness is used to note whatever is occurring on successive occasions of experience. As this is practiced continuously, over extended periods of time, the mindfulness builds up momentum. By means of this momentum, it is able to bring the “field of experience” into increasingly finer focus, until one can tune into the precise factors constituting any occasion of experience and distinguish them according to their place among the five aggregates. In this way, mindfulness paves the way for the discriminative understanding of the “constituted nature” of experience, allowing paññā to move in and discern the threads that make up the complex experiential occasion.

Then because one is attending to the unfolding of experience sequentially across occasions of experience, the characteristic comes into sharp focus. One can see how each event occurs and vanishes, followed by the next event, which occurs and vanishes, followed by the next event, which occurs and vanishes. As concentration grows stronger, this ability to focus upon the arising and passing of events becomes more refined, so that it seems one is perceiving the arising and passing of cognitive events in terms of nanoseconds. Again, this uncovers, even more starkly, the characteristic of impermanence, and from there one can move on to the characteristics of dukkha and anatta.

Of course, one who gains the jhānas, and then uses the concentration of the jhāna to focus on the procession of experience, has even more powerful resources for gaining direct perception of the radical truth of impermanence. But even this must begin with some degree of “bare attention” to immediate experience.

AW 5: I’m glad to have this clarification, for it’s quite a different description of “bare attention” than is usually given in the modern Vipassana tradition and in the accounts of mindfulness one finds in psychology based thereon. I note, however, that you don’t include right thought in the noble factors that embrace mindfulness. But it seems to me that it is as critical to effective practice as any of the other factors of the path. But as soon as right thought is conjoined with mindfulness, it’s not really so “bare” after all.

I admit that I do still have trouble seeing mindfulness—as bare attention—as a wholesome mental factor, not because it isn’t remembering one’s wholesome qualities, but because I don’t believe bare attention necessarily leads to liberation. For example, I can easily imagine a Green Beret sharpshooter practicing mindfulness of breathing in order to be a better sniper. The Green Beret’s motivation might be to serve and protect his country, so his practice wouldn’t necessarily be contaminated by gross hatred or craving. Nevertheless, I don’t believe his mind would necessarily be in a wholesome state while mindfully attending to his breath. Another person might practice bare mindfulness in order to improve his chess game or play better tennis. Likewise, a rabbit sitting quietly in a field might on occasion be resting in bare attention, vigilantly mindful of its environment, but that wouldn’t imply that it’s moving toward liberation by means of a wholesome mental state. I believe motivation is crucial. For one’s mind to be wholesome, one doesn’t necessarily have to bring to mind wholesome qualities or attend to bodhipakkhiya dhammas. I believe the kind of mindfulness defined earlier by Nāgasena is quite clearly a wholesome mind-state, for it’s evidently oriented toward the purification of the mind.

I guess my underlying concern is that when sati is glossed as bare mindfulness, this can easily be (and often is) interpreted to mean that right thought and right view do not need to be cultivated separately, nor is there any need to study the suttas and commentaries. A lot of Buddhist meditators nowadays believe that studying Dharma is a waste of time, and I’ve heard a number of them refer to Buddhist theory as “clap-trap” and “mumbo-jumbo,” and they’re eager to strip Buddhist meditation of its Buddhist roots so that it is “unconstrained by dogma.” No doubt, Buddhists are as prone to dogma as are followers of other religious traditions as well as scientists. But when sati is equated with bare attention, an implication for many people is that Buddhist theory is irrelevant: you can realize all that needs to be realized simply by being mindful, without judgment, from moment to moment to whatever arises. If that were all vipassanā is, the Buddha could have saved his breath. One dhamma talk after his enlightenment would have been sufficient.

I fully agree with your concluding statement that one must begin with some degree of “bare attention” to immediate experience. But it seems to me that the practice of mindfulness in general and vipassanā in particular entails a good deal more than that.

BB 5: I believe I already covered the qualms expressed in “AW 4” with the following words in “BB 4”:

“Sati, as bare attention, is never completely bare. When practiced in the full context of the noble eightfold path (even the path-practice of a worldling) it is, or should be, embraced by other factors of the path, most notably by right view, right motivation, and right effort (factors 1, 2, and 6); it is already supported by the three morality factors (3, 4, 5).”

You were worried that I had missed out on right thought, and further on in your letter you expressed concern about the need for proper motivation; but the factor often translated as right thought, *sammā saṅkappa*, is what I have here translated “right motivation” (it is elsewhere translated “right intention”). I’m not sure how the Tibetan translations render the second path factor, but the Pāli term suggests the purposive, motivational element in thought, rather than the cognitive, which is covered by right view. In my understanding, without right view or right intention, one could be practicing “bare mindfulness,” and yet that “bare mindfulness” is unlikely to develop into *sammā sati*, right mindfulness. Similarly, one could be practicing mindfulness of breathing, or contemplation of bodily sensations, or loving-kindness meditation, or perhaps even reflective meditation on the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination as applicable to this present life alone (no trespassing into unverifiable past and future lives), and these practices, while being “wholesome,” would still be deficient as Dharma practices.

AW 6: Ah, what an excellent translation of the Pāli term *sammā saṅkappa*! The Tibetan term for “right thought,” on the other hand, is *yang dag pa'i rtog pa*, which is glossed as “engaging with the meaning of the teachings in the sutras and so on.” The Tibetan term for “right view” is *yang dag pa'i lta ba*, which is glossed as “the discerning awareness of how one perceives ultimate reality with non-conceptual, primordial consciousness.” The Pāli term for “right thought” may indeed be covered by “right view,” but the corresponding Tibetan terms have a somewhat different connotation.

BB 5: A counter-question: Could a student of Madhyamaka, without accepting karma and rebirth, undertake the Madhyamaka meditations on emptiness? Aren’t there contemporary Westerners who are following this approach? I think I’ve heard of students of Tibetan Buddhism learning *dzogchen* and yet remaining “agnostic” about the issue of karma and past and future lives. The question is whether such meditation practices, without mundane right view, without right intention towards any “world-transcending” goal, could lead to profound insights and “world-transcending” realizations. I would be skeptical, but leaving aside those who petulantly refuse to assent to Buddhist teachings, what if someone takes up the practice as a purely empirical experiment, engaging it with full earnestness, could they achieve profound realizations (if not world-transcending ones)? I don’t know ... which is not to say that under normal conditions I would endorse this approach. Rather I would recommend a follower of the Dharma to adopt a balanced approach that integrates study and practice, conceptual understanding and meditative experience.

AW 6: Although there certainly are contemporary Westerners undertaking Madhyamaka meditations on emptiness without accepting karma and rebirth, in many cases I believe they also trying to meditate on emptiness without any sound basis in study and critical reflection. And the result of such ungrounded practice, I have found, is that such novices often slip into various forms of nihilism. Having engaged in a simplistic wholes-and-parts analysis of the self, they conclude the self doesn't exist at all, and some people extend this extreme conclusion to all phenomena. In some cases, this leads the misguided meditator to refute causality, including both causal patterns or regularities discovered by scientists as well as the natural laws of karma discovered by the Buddha. According to the Madhyamaka tradition, such an abandonment of relative truth, including the laws of karma in the context of rebirth, is tantamount to turning the medicine of the Middle Way view into poison.

Nowadays, the practice of Dzogchen has also become popular among some Westerners, and unfortunately, such meditation is often taught without the rich context of the Dzogchen view and conduct. When this happens, Dzogchen is reduced to bare attention, but this by itself is a pale facsimile of genuine Dzogchen practice. There's a common, populist tendency in the contemporary dissemination of Buddhism to overlook or dismiss the importance of sustained theoretical and ethical training that traditionally preceded intensive meditation in the Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Naturally, very few people have the will and ability to engage in such professional training, but it's misleading for people to be taught radically simplified versions of these meditative traditions and come away with the impression that this is all there is to them. Many Western Buddhists today reject Buddhist assertions of rebirth and karma, falsely claiming that the Buddha just picked up these beliefs from his cultural environment, while remaining skeptical about them himself. If such Buddhists were to achieve the *jhānas*, they might be able to put the Buddhist assertions to the test of experience. But most are satisfied with lay practice in the "dry insight" system of vipassanā and never get around to rigorous, sustained training in the *jhānas*, which leaves them high and dry with respect to personal insight into past lives. Buddhists have the potential to revolutionize the scientific understanding of consciousness, but only if we emphasize professional training in Buddhist theory and practice, and not years on end of novice practice.

Could someone achieve profound realizations by taking up such practice as a purely empirical experiment, engaging it with full earnestness? This is a good empirical question. I expect that if they kept pure ethical discipline, cultivated a meaningful, altruistic motivation, and devoted themselves to meditation with confidence in the practice, in the teacher, and in themselves, they might indeed achieve profound realizations. Whatever degree of confidence one may have in the Buddha's teachings, I wholeheartedly with your recommendation that a follower of the Dharma adopt a balanced approach that integrates study and practice, conceptual understanding and meditative experience. This is the time-tested approach, and within the brief span of a human life, this, to my mind, is the most meaningful and effective way to devote oneself to the path of liberation.

AW 6: I have carefully read through your long, erudite, and insightful responses to all my questions, and I'm deeply grateful that you took the time to do so in what is undoubtedly a very busy schedule. You have answered all my questions, dispelled my uncertainty, and for this I offer my warm and sincere thanks. If there's any way I can repay your kindness in the future, I hope you will not hesitate to ask.

Finally, a request: might I have your permission to share our recent correspondence with a few friends who are interested in these matters?

BB 5: Thank you very much for this email and for the one I received yesterday in which you arranged our correspondence into the proper sequence. This makes it much easier to follow the exchange of ideas.

Please feel free to share the correspondence with anyone who is interested.

Again, with best wishes,

Bhikkhu Bodhi

With all good wishes,
Alan