



The Centrality of Mindfulness-Related Meditations in Early Buddhist Discourse

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Abstract

This article surveys references to mindfulness-related meditations found in Pāli discourses in the first five chapters of the *Majjhima-nikāya* and their parallels, showing the ubiquity of a concern with contemplative practices in early Buddhist thought. Such concerns were, according to these texts, not confined to monastics, but also included lay practitioners. Overall, the impression emerges that meditation as a key element of early Buddhist thought stands within a wider doctrinal and even cosmological context.

Keywords Absorption · Awakening · *bhāvanā* · *brahmavihāra* · Contemplation · *dhyāna* · Immaterial attainments · Immeasurables · Lay meditation · Mindfulness

The perhaps most prominent expression of a systematic practice of mindfulness takes the form of its four establishments (*satipaṭṭhāna*, *smṛtyupasthāna*, 念處, *dran pa nye bar gzhag pa*). In addition, mindfulness has also an important contribution to offer to the cultivation of tranquility, being a quality present in each of the four absorptions (*jhāna*, *dhyāna*, 禪, *bsam gtan*) as well as being of relevance to the cultivation of the four *brahmavihāras* (Anālayo 2019a and 2020a), often also referred to as “immeasurable” or “boundless” states (*appamāṇa*, *apramāṇa*, 無量, *tshad med pa*). In the words of Dahl and Davidson (2019, p. 60), “mindfulness plays an important role as a foundation for other contemplative practices.”

The pervasive and foundational role of mindfulness in this respect can be explored further by surveying direct and indirect references to meditation in early Buddhist discourse. Such a survey can put this role into context by showing the degree of importance that was accorded to such mindfulness-related contemplative practices in texts reflecting early stages in the development of Buddhist thought. As a survey of all extant early Buddhist discourse collections would go beyond the confines of what is possible within an article, a convenient option for undertaking such a survey would be to examine

the first five chapters in the collection of discourses that are of medium length, the *Majjhima-nikāya*, for which information on the discourse parallels to each of the relevant Pāli passages is readily available (Anālayo 2011; the survey below does not cover parallels in *Vinaya* texts). According to a commentarial indication (Sp IV 789), someone in the ancient setting who wished to become a reciter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* needed to memorize at least its first five chapters, which contain altogether fifty discourses and correspond to about one-third of the entire collection. This makes it fair to assume that the discourses allocated to these first five chapters were seen by the ancient reciters as fairly representative of the main teachings found in this collection.

The First Chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

The first discourse in the first chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* collection is the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta*, which offers an analysis of the perceptual process of different persons in regard to a range of possible objects. In all versions of this discourse (MN 1 and EĀ 44.6; see also MĀ 106 and T 56), the objects listed include the four immaterial spheres, whose meditative cultivation requires mastery of the four absorptions (Anālayo 2020a, p. 574).

The next discourse, the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, presents seven methods conducive to abandoning unwholesome influxes in the mind. The parallel versions agree that one of the methods

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for achieving this goal is meditative “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*), which concerns the seven factors of awakening (MN 2, MĀ 10, T 31, EĀ 40.6, Up 2069; see also AN 6.58). Mindfulness is the first and foundational quality among these seven.

The *Dhammadāyāda-sutta* takes the form of an exhortation by the Buddha, followed by an explanation of its implications by his chief disciple Sāriputta. In all versions of the discourse, this explanation throws into relief the importance of seclusion in order to overcome unwholesome conditions in the mind and to cultivate the eightfold path, of which right mindfulness is the seventh member (MN 3, MĀ 88, and EĀ 18.3).

The *Bhayabherava-sutta*, in agreement with its parallel, reports the Buddha’s own meditative practice in seclusion leading up to his gaining of the four absorptions and of awakening (MN 4 and EĀ 31.1).

The *Anāgana-sutta* takes the form of an exhortation by Sāriputta, followed by an illustration of its import provided by his companion Mahāmoggallāna. The illustration highlights how the exhortation given will be received by different practitioners, contrasting those who are slack and without qualities like mindfulness and concentration to their counterparts (MN 5, MĀ 87, T 49, and EĀ 25.6).

The *Ākaṅkheyya-sutta* and its parallels recommend the cultivation of tranquility and insight in order for a range of different wishes to be fulfilled (MN 6, MĀ 105, EĀ 37.5, and Up 2019; see also AN 10.71).

The *Vatthūpama-sutta* and three of its four parallels describe how the removal of mental defilements can lead over to the meditative radiation of the immeasurable or boundless states (MN 7, MĀ 93, T 51, and EĀ 13.5). Another parallel refers only to the cultivation of *mettā* but not to that of the other three immeasurable or boundless states (T 582).

The *Sallekha-sutta* and one of its two parallels present the four absorptions and the four immaterial attainments as not constituting real effacement, if one does not make an effort to remove unwholesome states (MN 8 and MĀ 91). Although another parallel does not list these attainments (EĀ 47.9), this could be the result of a textual corruption, as the discourse shows internal inconsistencies elsewhere (see Anālayo 2011, p. 60). Moreover, this version nevertheless draws attention to the need to develop concentration in its survey of what constitutes real effacement.

The *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* expounds various ways of arriving at right view. According to all versions of this discourse, one means of doing so is by way of the four noble truths, the last of which corresponds to the eightfold path, with right mindfulness as its seventh member (MN 9, Tripāṭhī 1962, p. 53, MĀ 29, and SĀ 344).

The final discourse in the first chapter of the collection of medium-length discourses is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10, MĀ 98, and EĀ 12.1), all three versions of which are entirely dedicated to the topic of mindfulness practice (Anālayo 2003, 2013, and 2018).

In this way, the ten discourses in the first chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, together with their parallels, relate in one way or another to the topic of meditation, covering the cultivation of mindfulness, the awakening factors, the absorptions, the immeasurable states, and the immaterial attainments.

The Second Chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

The second chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* begins with the *Cūlasihanāda-sutta*. In agreement with its parallels, the discourse sets out on the premise that reaching the final goal requires overcoming the three mental roots of unwholesomeness: lust, hatred, and delusion (MN 11, MĀ 103, and EĀ 27.2). Awareness of the presence and absence of these three is a task of the third establishment of mindfulness (MN 10, MĀ 98, and EĀ 12.1), whose cultivation could therefore be considered an implicit dimension of the *Cūlasihanāda-sutta*’s presentation.

The *Mahāsihanāda-sutta* and its parallel report the Buddha listing his own meditative attainments (MN 12 and T 757). The Pāli discourse concludes with the Buddha stating that he could teach without interruption on the topic of the four establishments of mindfulness even for a hundred years without running out of material, a declaration found also in another partial parallel (MN 12 and SĀ 612).

In the context of an analysis of sensuality, material form, and feeling tones, the *Mahādukkhakkhandha-sutta* and three of its four parallels present the four absorptions as exemplifying the gratification of feeling tones (MN 13, MĀ 99, T 53, and T 737; not in EĀ 21.9).

The *Cūladukkhakkhandha-sutta* and its parallels report the Buddha highlighting the superiority of his experience of happiness through absorption attainment compared with the pleasures even the king of the country might experience (MN 14, MĀ 100, T 54, and T 55).

The *Anumāna-sutta*, together with its parallels, recommends regularly examining oneself for the presence of a series of unwholesome conditions, similar to examining one’s face in a mirror (MN 15, MĀ 89, and T 50). This illustration occurs elsewhere among the early discourses to illustrate contemplation of mental states, corresponding to the third establishment of mindfulness (Anālayo 2019b, p. 1928). Such correspondence makes it fair to assume that the recommendation given in the *Anumāna-sutta* and its parallels would require cultivating mindfulness.

The *Cetokhila-sutta* describes, in agreement with its Chinese *Āgama* parallels, the types of mental bondage that need to be overcome in order to be able to reach awakening. This ability finds illustration in the example of a hen’s brooding, which will lead to the hatching of the chicks (MN 16, MĀ 206, and EĀ 51.4). Elsewhere this simile illustrates the practice of the qualities pertinent to awakening, among

which the four establishments of mindfulness occur as the first set (SN 22.101, Glass 2007, p. 207, SĀ 263; see also AN 7.67 and Anālayo 2020b).

The *Vanapattha-sutta* and its parallels recommend that one should continue to stay in a place where accommodation and food are difficult to obtain as long as one's meditation practice and cultivation of mindfulness improves (MN 17 and MĀ 107 or MĀ 108). If this is not the case, however, one should leave, even if accommodation and food are easily obtained.

The final three discourses in this second chapter relate in one way or another to the topic of thoughts. The *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* and its parallels depict the potential proliferation of thoughts in relation to each of the senses (MN 18, MĀ 115, and EĀ 40.10), the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* and its parallel report the Buddha's pre-awakening division of thoughts into unwholesome and wholesome types (MN 19 and MĀ 102), and the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta* and its parallel present five methods for emerging from unwholesome thoughts (MN 20 and MĀ 102).

The latter two discourses explicitly refer to meditation: The *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* and its parallel report the Buddha's pre-awakening attainment of the four absorptions and three higher knowledges; the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta* and its parallel show how each of the five methods they outline can lead to concentration. Although the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* and its parallels do not have a comparable explicit reference, their presentation would nevertheless be of considerable relevance to mindfulness practice in relation to the sense doors.

Looking back on the ten discourses in the second chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, although meditation practice is no longer as ubiquitous as it was in the first chapter, nevertheless the majority of the discourses explicitly refer to this topic, covering the cultivation of mindfulness and the absorptions.

The Third Chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

The third chapter begins with the *Kakacūpama-sutta*, which presents the famous simile of the saw. In both versions of this discourse, this simile encourages balance of mind even when faced by bandits who brutally cut one apart with a saw. The simile serves to illustrate an unshakeable attitude that is based on the meditative cultivation of *mettā* in the form of a boundless radiation (MN 21 and MĀ 193; the latter mentions all four immeasurables).

The *Alagaddūpama-sutta* and its parallel contain an exposition of insight contemplation on not-self (MN 22 and MĀ 200). Successful implementation of such insight practice then finds illustration in the famous simile of the twigs in Jeta's Grove, whose removal and burning would not call up any reaction in an observer.

The next two discourses, the *Vammika-sutta* and the *Rathavinīta-sutta*, together with their parallels, describe

progress to awakening with the help of similes that involve digging into an anthill and traveling via a relay of chariots. The second of these two illustrates seven stages of purification that have served as the scaffolding for the *Visuddhimagga*, an important treatise on Theravāda meditation (Anālayo 2005 and 2009). The introductory part of the same discourse and its parallels eulogizes the monastic who delivers the simile of the relay of chariots by listing his praiseworthy qualities, one of which is his endowment with concentration (MN 24, MĀ 9, and EĀ 39.10).

Although the *Vammika-sutta* does not explicitly mention meditation practice in a comparable manner (MN 23), two of the four parallels to the Pāli discourse agree in concluding the delivery of the simile of the anthill with an injunction to retire into seclusion and meditate (SĀ 1079 and T 95; unlike SĀ² 18). Another Chinese parallel reports that the monastic to whom the discourse was addressed retired into seclusion for intensive practice and became an arahant (EĀ 39.9), an outcome also reported in the Pāli commentary, which explains that the simile of digging into an anthill served as his meditation practice, *kammaṭṭhāna* (Ps II 134).

The *Nivāpa-sutta* also involves a simile, which in both versions of this discourse illustrates how some practitioners may fall into the hands of Māra, the tempter in early Buddhist imagery. Going beyond Māra can be achieved by way of attaining the four absorptions, the four immaterial attainments, and awakening (MN 25 and MĀ 178).

The Buddha's own gaining of the higher two of the four immaterial attainments and his awakening forms the theme of the next discourse, the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel (MN 26 and MĀ 204). The final parts in the two versions of this discourse also cover the four absorptions.

The same four absorptions feature as part of an account of the gradual path of practice leading up to full awakening in the subsequent discourse, the *Cūlahatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel (MN 27 and MĀ 146).

The *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel present contemplation of the impermanent nature of the five aggregates affected by clinging in the context of an examination of the four material elements (MN 28 and MĀ 30), leading up to a reference to the simile of the saw found in the first discourse in this chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

The final two discourses in this chapter, the *Mahāsāropama-sutta* and the *Cūlasāropama-sutta*, together with their single parallel, highlight the need to proceed all the way to full awakening instead of settling for some lesser attainment. Their description includes the gaining of concentration as something that should lead on to awakening rather than being mistaken for the final goal (MN 29, MN 30, and their shared parallel EĀ 43.4).

In the third chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the majority of discourses cover, in one way or another, the topic of meditation. This can take the form of referring to the need to retire

into seclusion, describing the boundless radiation of *mettā*, referring to concentration in general or the absorptions and immaterial attainments in particular, and mentioning the insightful contemplations of impermanence and of not self.

The Fourth Chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

The first discourse in the fourth chapter of the collection of medium-length discourses is the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta*, which in agreement with its parallels depicts a group of monastics living together in harmony and having reached different levels of absorption and the four immaterial attainments (MN 31, Silverlock 2015, p. 498, MĀ 185, and EĀ 24.8).

The ensuing *Mahāgosiṅga-sutta* and its parallels extoll the qualities of several eminent monastics (MN 32, MĀ 185, EĀ 37.3, and T 154.16), which include meditation in seclusion (Revata), the exercise of supernormal abilities to be acquired through meditation (Anuruddha), and meditative mastery over the mind (Sāriputta).

The *Mahāgopāḷaka-sutta* and the *Cūlagopāḷaka-sutta*, together with their parallels, employ the simile of herding cows to illustrate the qualities required to reach awakening (MN 33, SĀ 1249, T 123, EĀ 49.1; see also AN 11.18) and the different levels of awakening (MN 34, SĀ 1248, and EĀ 43.6). A quality mentioned in all versions of the first of these two discourses is the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness. Even though the second discourse only covers levels of awakening and does not go into the details of the meditative practices required for this purpose, the same can safely be considered implicit in view of the description provided in the preceding discourse.

The ensuing two Pāli discourses, together with their respective parallels, describe encounters between the Buddha and a Jain debater by the name of *Saccaka*. Two out of three versions of the *Cūlasaccaka-sutta* report that the Buddha delivered instructions on contemplation of not self as a means for a disciple to go beyond doubt (MN 35 and SĀ 110; not found in EĀ 37.10). The version that does not report such instruction shows distinct signs of later modification (Anālayo 2011, p. 231f). The report of the second encounter between this debater and the Buddha, given in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel, contains an autobiographical account of the Buddha's progress to awakening, which covers his pre-awakening meditation practices (MN 36 and Liu 2010, p. 228). Both versions of the discourse set out on the topic of the contrast between cultivating the body and cultivating the mind, the latter obviously intending meditation.

The *Cūlatanḥāsāṅkhaya-sutta* and one of its two parallels present contemplation of impermanence as the path to the destruction of craving (MN 37 and EĀ 19.3). The other parallel sets in only at a point in narrative time after this

instruction and for this reason does not have an explicit reference to insight meditation (SĀ 505).

The exposition in the *Mahātanḥāsāṅkhaya-sutta* and its parallel leads up to a description of how the cultivation of mindfulness of the body can result in a boundless mental condition that enables remaining balanced with whatever happens at any sense door (MN 38 and MĀ 201).

The final two discourses in this chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* describe what makes one become a true recluse. According to the *Mahā-assapura-sutta* and one of its two parallels, this requires, among other things, the practice of mindful sense-restraint, clear comprehension, removal of the hindrances, attainment of the four absorptions, and the destruction of the influxes (MN 39 and MĀ 182). The other parallel version only mentions the first and last of these (EĀ 49.8). Although this much already involves the topic of meditation, it could still be noted that this discourse appears to have suffered from textual loss (Anālayo 2011, p. 258). The *Cūḷa-assapura-sutta* and its parallels agree in describing the meditative radiation of the immeasurable or boundless states as a practice conducive to becoming a true recluse (MN 40 and MĀ 183).

In line with what emerged in the survey of previous chapters, meditation continues to be a prominent theme in the discourses assembled in the fourth chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. Topics covered are meditative seclusion, the four immeasurables, the four absorptions, the four immaterial attainments, supernormal abilities gained through meditation, the four establishments of mindfulness, mindfulness of the body, contemplation of impermanence and not self, and complete mastery over the mind.

The Fifth Chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya*

The first two discourses in this chapter, which are nearly identical to each other, explain what leads to rebirth in heaven or hell. The *Sāleyyaka-sutta* and the *Verañjaka-sutta* conclude by indicating that the type of moral conduct conducive to a heavenly rebirth can alternatively also become the basis for progress to awakening (MN 41 and MN 42). Their two parallels offer a more detailed coverage of alternatives to such rebirth by indicating that the same conduct can also serve as the foundation for the meditative cultivation of the absorptions, immeasurable states, immaterial attainments, and supernormal abilities (SĀ 1042 and SĀ 1043). Although these meditative practices are not mentioned explicitly in the Pāli discourses, the commentary relates different levels of heavenly rebirth, mentioned in the *Sāleyyaka-sutta* and the *Verañjaka-sutta*, to the cultivation of different levels of absorption (Ps II 333).

The *Mahāvedalla-sutta* and the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* present discussions on a variety of topics. These include the nature of concentration, of the first absorption, of deliverance of the

mind, and of the meditative attainment of cessation (MN 43, MN 44, MĀ 210, MĀ 211, and Up 1005).

The *Cūḷadharmmasamādāna-sutta* and the *Mahādhammasamādāna-sutta*, together with their parallels, distinguish between ways of undertaking things according to whether these are pleasant or painful when doing them or else when experiencing their result. In the case of the first of these two discourses, the Pāli version refers to the four absorptions when describing what is pleasant now and in future (MN 45), whereas its parallel rather takes up progress to the third level of awakening (MĀ 174). The other of the two Pāli discourses and its parallels do not clearly relate to meditation practice (MN 46, MĀ 175, and T 83).

The *Vīmaṃsaka-sutta* and its parallel describe how someone can investigate the mental condition of another, in this case of the Buddha himself (MN 47 and MĀ 186). This would appear to be a mode of applying the third establishment of mindfulness in an external manner. Of the ensuing *Kosambiya-sutta*, no parallel is known (MN 48); hence, the indications it provides are not as strong as they would be if supported by parallel(s). The Pāli discourse mentions *mettā* cultivated by body, speech, and mind; it also refers to the five hindrances and the training in the higher mind and higher wisdom, which clearly intend a meditative form of training.

The *Brahmanimantanika-sutta* and its parallel depict a meeting between the Buddha and the ancient Indian god Brahmā (MN 49 and MĀ 78). Similar to the case of the *Mahādhammasamādāna-sutta*, this discourse does not have a clear-cut relation to meditation practice. The last discourse in this chapter, the *Māratajjaniya-sutta*, reports an encounter between Mahāmoggallāna, an eminent disciple of the Buddha, and Māra (MN 50, MĀ 131, T 66, and T 67; see also EĀ 48.6). This leads on to a tale of the past which covers the meditative attainment of cessation, the cultivation of the immeasurables, and contemplation of impermanence.

The discourses in the fifth chapter as a whole accord less room to meditation practices, compared with the preceding chapters. Nevertheless, they do cover topics that came up regularly in previous chapters, such as concentration, the absorptions, the immeasurable states, the immaterial attainments, and supernormal abilities gained through meditation.

Overall, the first five chapters of the *Majjhima-nikāya* clearly show a prominent concern with meditation practices. At the same time, however, only one discourse out of fifty is dedicated entirely to this topic: the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This reflects a basic pattern in early Buddhist thought, where the practice of meditation tends to appear within a broader context and does not stand on its own. In other words, descriptions of early Buddhist meditation come closely intertwined with other teachings and can hardly be properly understood apart from these. This provides a contrast to a trend in contemporary circles, highlighted by McMahan (2008, p. 185) as follows: “Paradoxically, while meditation is often considered the heart

of Buddhism, it is also deemed the element most detachable from the tradition itself.”

Descriptive and Prescriptive

The above survey is limited to textual sources. For the early period of Buddhist thought and practice, such limitations can hardly be overcome, as archeological records, in the form of inscriptions, art, and monastery remains, tend to testify only to ensuing periods in the development of Indian Buddhism. Moreover, some of the texts surveyed above are prescriptive, depicting what ought to be done, rather than descriptive, in the sense of reflecting actual practice. An example in case for a prescriptive type of text is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which depicts how mindfulness ought to be practiced in order to lead to awakening. The discourse does not take the form of reporting actual practice.

However, at times, textual descriptions found among the early discourses can take on a more descriptive nuance. A case in point from a later chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* would be the *Dhammacetiya-sutta*. In agreement with its parallels, the discourse reports that a local king had gone for a pleasure outing. Seeing secluded spots suitable for meditation reminded him of the Buddha:

These tree roots are indeed lovely and inspiring, with little sound and little noise, with an atmosphere free from people and remote from humans, being suitable for solitary retreat, just like [the type of places where] I used to visit the Blessed One.

(MN 89: *imāni kho tāni rukkhamūlāni pāsādikāni pasādanīyāni appasaddāni appanigghosāni vijanavātāni manussarāhasseyyakāni paṭisallāṇasārubbāni, yattha sudaṃ mayam taṃ bhagavantaṃ payirupāsāma*).

These tree roots are quiet and without noise, secluded, without disturbance, without people, being suitable for sitting in meditation. In such places I have frequently met the Buddha.

(MĀ 213: 此樹下寂無音聲，遠離，無惡，無有人民，隨順燕坐。此處我數往見佛)。

‘This grove with fruit trees is all without sound and also without people; it is a quiet and empty place.’ Having seen it, he in turn remembered the Tathāgata’s former giving of teachings.

(EĀ 38.10: 此園果樹木皆無聲響，亦無人民，寂然空虛。見已，便憶如來說諸法之本)。

The three discourse versions agree that the king felt so inspired that he decided to pay a visit to the Buddha right away.

On arrival at the monastery, the king encountered monastics who informed him regarding how best to approach the Buddha, as the latter was sitting in secluded meditation. The monastics themselves were at that time engaged in walking meditation:

At that time numerous monastics were doing walking meditation in the open.

(MN 89: *tena kho pana samayena sambahulā bhikkhū abbhokāse caṅkamanti*).

Numerous monastics were practicing walking meditation in the open.

(MĀ 213: 眾多比丘露地經行).

At that time, many monastics were practicing walking meditation in the open.

(EĀ 38.10: 爾時眾比丘輩於露地而經行).

A comparable instance involves another king who, on a moonlight night, had decided to approach the Buddha. Knowing that the Buddha was accompanied by a large group of disciples, the king became suspicious that he was being led into a trap, as he did not hear any sound even though he was coming close to where the Buddha and his followers were staying.

How could there indeed be not even a sound of sneezing, a sound of coughing, or any noise in such a large assembly of monastics, with one thousand two hundred and fifty monastics?

(DN 2: *kathaṃ hi nāma tāva mahato bhikkhusaṅghassa aḍḍhateḷasānaṃ bhikkhusatānaṃ neva khipitasaddo bhavissati, na ukkāsitassaddo na nigghoso ti?*).

[Although] he is with a great company of one thousand two hundred and fifty people, it is quiet and there is no sound.

(DĀ 27: 彼有大眾千二百五十人, 寂然無聲).

Now there are many monastics, and yet one does not hear a sound.

(T 22: 今比丘多而不聞聲).

I heard that the Tathāgata has a following of one thousand two hundred and fifty disciples, [yet] I now do not hear their sound.

(EĀ 43.7: 聞如來將千二百五十弟子, 今不聞其聲).

These episodes can be complemented with another discourse describing an unsuccessful attempt by a celestial king to visit the Buddha, thwarted as the latter had retired to dwell in meditative concentration (DN 21: *paṭisallīno bhagavā*, DĀ 14: 世

尊三昧, T 15: 世尊未出三昧, MĀ 134: 世尊入定, and T 203.73: 佛今在定).

Whereas these descriptions are to some degree laudatory, another episode reflects a preoccupation with meditation in a way that casts the person in question in a negative light. The story concerns a monastic who at that time was serving as the Buddha's attendant. This monastic was so keen on withdrawing into seclusion to meditate that he refused to do his duty or even to wait until another monastic arrived who could have assumed his duty in his stead. His reasoning was that, whereas the Buddha had nothing further to do, he still needed to make progress:

Venerable sir, there is nothing further to be done for the Blessed One and no improving of what has been done. But, venerable sir, for me there is indeed something further to be done and there is [room] for improving what has been done.

(AN 9.3: *bhagavato, bhante, natthi kiñci uttarim karaṇīyaṃ, natthi katassa paṭicayo. mayhaṃ kho pana, bhante, atthi uttarim karaṇīyaṃ, atthi katassa paṭicayo*).

The Blessed One has nothing to be done, nothing to do, and also nothing to be contemplated. Blessed One, I have something to be done, something to do, and also something to be contemplated.

(MĀ 56: 世尊無為, 無作, 亦無所觀. 世尊, 我有為, 有作, 而有所觀).

In agreement with a Gāndhārī fragment that has preserved the ensuing part of the discourse (Jantrasrisalai et al. 2016, p. 28), the two versions quoted above report that the monastic in question was overwhelmed by unwholesome states during his meditation. Clearly, from the viewpoint of these textual sources, his behavior was quite inappropriate. It follows that the keen interest in meditation evinced in this episode could not be motivated by an attempt to depict exemplary conduct.

According to another passage, the leader of a group of non-Buddhist practitioners mocked the Buddha for his secluded and meditative lifestyle (DN 25, DĀ 8, T 11, and MĀ 104). The same discourse precedes this episode with a standard pericope employed regularly elsewhere in the discourses, according to which even lay disciples of the Buddha were well known among non-Buddhist practitioners for being fond of silence and quietude.

In sum, the few passages surveyed here should suffice to show that, within the limits of what can reasonably be expected from textual sources, indications of a descriptive type can be found that support the impression conveyed by prescriptive accounts, in that meditation practice was indeed a matter of central importance in early Buddhism.

Lay Meditators

As the standard pericope in the last passage mentioned above already implies, such concern with meditation practice does not appear to have been confined to monastic disciples. In the case of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, the circumstance that the instructions are explicitly addressed to fully ordained male monastics (*bhikkhu*/ 比丘) can at first sight convey the impression that the mindfulness practice described in the discourse was only meant for them. However, closer inspection of such modes of address brings to light that these reflect ancient Indian protocols of conversation. The same custom can also take the form of addressing a group of friends by the name of their leader, whose name will, for this purpose, be in the plural (Collett and Anālayo 2014). In other words, when a teaching is addressed to fully ordained male monastics, this only implies that some such monastics were present in the audience. It does not mean that the entire audience was made up of only fully ordained male monastics or that the teaching was only meant for them.

The early discourses explicitly mention female monastics accomplished in the cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness (SN 47.10 and SĀ 615). Another relevant passage presents an encouragement that even newly ordained monastics should immediately be instructed in these four establishments (SN 47.4 and SĀ 621), showing that mindfulness practice was not seen as the sole reserve of specialists. Other passages refer to lay practitioners accomplished in the cultivation of these same four establishments of mindfulness (e.g., SN 47.30 and its parallel SĀ 1038).

The introductory narration of a discourse from the *Majjhima-nikāya* involves a lay person inviting a group of monastics for a meal, with the evident purpose of getting them to clarify a rather subtle distinction regarding concentrative meditational attainments (MN 127 and MĀ 79). This passage provides circumstantial evidence for lay practice. Other lay disciples are on record for having mastered absorption attainment (e.g., SN 41.8 and SĀ 574).

These examples from the early discourses would already suffice to show that lay practice of meditation in general, and of mindfulness in particular, is not just a recent innovation. Turning to texts that stem from later times, a Theravāda commentary depicts the dedication to mindfulness practice among lay people of the ancient Indian Kuru country in the following manner:

If some woman were to ask [another]: ‘Ma, to the cultivation of which establishment of mindfulness do you attend to?’ and she were to reply: ‘None’, they would reproach her: ‘Your life is a disgrace, even though you are alive, you are as if dead.’ And then, having admonished her, saying: ‘Do not act like that again!’,

they would make her learn a certain establishment of mindfulness. However, if she were to say: ‘I attend to such-and-such establishment of mindfulness indeed,’ having given her praise by saying: ‘It is well, it is well,’ they would commend her: ‘Your life is lived well; you have indeed gained being a [true] human. For your sake the Fully Awakened One has arisen,’ and so on.

(Ps I 228: *sace kāci itthī, amma, tvaṃ kataraṃ satipaṭṭhānabhāvanāṃ manasikarosī ti pucchitā, na kiñcī ti vadati, taṃ garahanti: dhiratthu tava jīvitāṃ, jīvamānā pi tvaṃ matasadisā ti. atha naṃ mā dāni puna evam akāsī ti ovaḍitvā aññataraṃ satipaṭṭhānaṃ uggaṇhāpentī. yā pana ahaṃ asukaṃ satipaṭṭhānaṃ nāma manasikaromī ti vadati, tassā sādhu sādhu ti sādhuḥkāraṃ datvā, tava jīvitāṃ sujīvitāṃ, tvaṃ nāma manussattaṃ pattā, tavatthāya sammāsambuddho uppanno ti ādīhi pasamsanti*).

An example from a different Buddhist tradition and much later times is the probably most famous Tibetan yogi, the eleventh to twelfth century Milarepa, who did not take monastic vows (Sernesi 2019). His Tibetan teacher Marpa even lived a married life (Quintman 2004; on Milarepa’s previous teachers see Martin 1982). Such examples clearly contradict an assessment by Lopez (2012, p. 81), according to which “over the course of its long history across Asia, Buddhist laypeople have not been expected to practice meditation, nor have they done so. Meditation has traditionally been a practice confined to monks and nuns.” The idea of such confinement appears to be a modern invention and does not accurately reflect the available evidence. Although lay meditation as a mass movement is indeed a recent development, lay practitioners of mindfulness-related meditations have ancient precedents in the history of Buddhism.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); DN, *Dīrgha-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; Ps, *Papañcasūdanī*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 99); SĀ², *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 100); SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; Sp, *Samantapāsādikā*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*

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