Focusing on an Object or Reflexive Self-Awareness? Mindfulness, Phenomenology and the Pāli *sutta*s

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Abstract

The concept of mindfulness within the contemporary mindfulness movement was the subject of a recent phenomenological critique. The present article confronts that critique in order to develop a phenomenologically viable interpretation of mindfulness that corresponds with how the word *sati* is used in the Pāli *sutta*s. By clarifying the distinction between intentional *objects* and intentional *acts*, it can be shown that mindfulness was not originally conceived of as an exercise in focusing on a meditation object, but as *reflexive self-awareness*. Consequently, it is wrong to describe mindfulness as 'bare attention'. Mindfulness was originally a philosophical enterprise, an attitude that can be cultivated only when one is attending to things while remaining aware of the broader context. Furthermore, an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) cannot cultivate what the Buddha called 'right mindfulness' (*sammāsati*). This is the province of the noble ones who have acquired the right view and are accomplished in virtue.

Keywords: mindfulness; phenomenology; Buddhism; Pāli *sutta*s; Ñāṇavīra Thera

1 Introduction

There has, in recent years, been a great deal of scholarly interest in the relationship between mindfulness and phenomenology. One direction that such studies have taken begins with the claim that phenomenology can play an important role in helping us better understand the practice of mindfulness (e.g. Akiñcano (2025), Čopelj (2022a, 2022b), Vörös (2021), Lundh (2020) and Lutz et al. (2015)). Another involves philosophical explorations of the similarities and differences between phenomenology and mindfulness (e.g. Bitbol (2019), Depraz (2019), Petitmengin (2006) and Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003)). A common thread throughout all this work is the suggestion that the phenomenological method can be thought of as being, or as being in some way analogous to, meditation practice. In my own contribution, for example, I attempted to demonstrate how '[b]oth phenomenology and the early Buddhist teachings emphasise the importance of adopting an originary perspective towards our own first-person experience' (Akiñcano 2025, p. 90). Lundh (2020, p. 497) goes even further: 'Mindfulness meditation represents one kind of phenomenological practice'.

However, in response to these trends, there are also some voices of caution. In particular, Stone and Zahavi (2021) point to a number of philosophical ambiguities in much of the literature on mindfulness, arguing that the idea of phenomenology as a kind of mindfulness practice is based on a misunderstanding of Husserl's phenomenology, overlooking its wider, more systematic and philosophical aims. In a later article, Stone and Zahavi (2022) elaborate on the ambiguities they have identified. Here they take on the contemporary notion of mindfulness that lies at the heart of the hugely popular psychotherapy programmes known as Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), e.g. Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Teasdale and Segal's Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. By employing phenomenology to subject this particular concept of mindfulness to philosophical scrutiny, they ask: 'What are the main ideas informing the contemporary notion of mindfulness, and should we accept them?' (p. 342).

In their reply to Stone and Zahavi's (2021) article, Depraz, Petitmengin and Bitbol (2024) do not so much address the concerns raised as question the authors' understanding of both Buddhism and phenomenology. Their criticism of Stone and Zahavi's presentation of Buddhism seems a little unfair, given the fact that the enquiry is limited to the notion of mindfulness as it has been defined within the contemporary mindfulness movement. Stone and Zahavi are fully aware that 'mindfulness is a highly contested term' (2021, p. 159). The focus was not on what the Buddha meant when he used the Pāli word *sati* (usually translated as 'mindfulness'), but on the definition of mindfulness for which there is now a wide consensus: 'in the psychological literature it is now generally accepted that, whatever else may be involved, mindfulness is necessarily present centred and non-judgemental' (Lutz et al. 2015, p. 636). Their criticism of Stone and Zahavi's understanding of phenomenology is, in my view, even more contentious. They claim that the authors are committed to a solipsistic and disembodied concept of the subject, and that they refuse to acknowledge the significance of the *epoché* for Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. These are strange conclusions to draw, given that nothing to this effect can be found in Stone and Zahavi's 2021 article, their 2022 article, or indeed—as the authors themselves point out in their (Stone and Zahavi 2024) reply to Depraz et al.'s reply—anywhere else in the vast amount of material that Zahavi has written on phenomenology.

Rather than attempting to discredit Stone and Zahavi's considerations, I believe it would be a lot more fruitful to engage with them head on. Dan Zahavi, after all, has a long history of interdisciplinary bridge-building. For example, he has argued that although phenomenology must, on the one hand, allow itself to be guided by the latest scientific knowledge, it has much to offer the sciences. Phenomenology can not only provide detailed descriptions of the explananda under investigation, 'but might also critically illuminate and challenge some of the theoretical assumptions made by empirical science' (Zahavi

2019, p. 131). This basic principle of interdisciplinarity ought to apply in the case of contemporary mindfulness research. While phenomenologists must be willing to accommodate the empirical findings of psychologists and neuroscientists, phenomenology can play an important role in questioning the ontological assumptions involved in the concept of mindfulness.

If Stone and Zahavi's phenomenological critique is valid, then we can perhaps conclude that there is a problem with the current working definition of mindfulness that has had such a profound influence on the psychological literature. This should come as no surprise to scholars of Buddhism. There have been many attempts (e.g. Vörös (2021), Anālayo (2019b), Bodhi (2013), Dreyfus (2013) and Gethin (2013)) to show how the interpretation of mindfulness at work in MBIs—i.e., mindfulness as present-centred non-judgemental awareness—significantly differs from the meaning of the Pāli word *sati* found in the early Buddhist texts, the Pāli *sutta*s.[1] Nevertheless, as far as I can tell, there has not yet been any attempt within the Early Buddhist Studies community to directly engage with Stone and Zahavi's concerns. This is what I intend to do in this present article. I will offer an interpretation of the meaning of the word *sati*, as it is used in the Pāli *sutta*s, that acknowledges and is guided by the philosophical issues raised by Stone and Zahavi. With this dual-pronged approach, that integrates textual analysis and phenomenological reflection, a more phenomenologically accurate interpretation of the Pāli *sutta*s can emerge. This interpretation, it will be shown, is not in fact new but can already be found in the fringes of Theravāda Buddhism in the work of Ñāṇavīra (2009, 2010), Ñāṇamoli (2022, 2021, 2014) and myself (Akiñcano 2025, 2024, 2019).

A brief map of the way forward is in order. I hope to address Stone and Zahavi's (2021, 2022) concerns by dividing them into two basic issues: intentionality and bare attention. In the following section, I will consider the intentional structure of consciousness, that lies at the heart of Husserl's early phenomenology, but which appears to have been inadequately grasped in some of the contemporary Buddhist literature. In particular, there is a lack of clarity regarding the distinction between intentional *objects*—the things that I am conscious of—as opposed to the various subjective *acts* of consciousness (e.g. thinking, perceiving, feeling, remembering). Clarifying this distinction will help to bring some order to the discussion. In section 3, I will examine the phrase 'bare attention', arguing that neither of the words 'bare' and 'attention' capture the meaning of *sati* found in the Pāli *sutta*s. Finally, in section 4, I will conclude by reconsidering Stone and Zahavi's claim that mindfulness and phenomenology are radically different endeavours. The picture of mindfulness I will be painting in this article looks remarkably similar, though not identical, to Hadot's (1995) notion of philosophy as a way of life.

2 Intentionality

Stone and Zahavi (2021, 2022) have argued that a phenomenologically viable account of mindfulness must successfully distinguish between intentional *objects* and intentional *acts*. All conscious experience necessarily involves both the things that we are conscious of (intentional objects) and the manner in which they are given to us (intentional acts). Any intentional act, such as perceiving, believing, remembering or desiring, can have a variety of possible intentional objects (e.g. I can *see* a tree, the ground, the sky and a bird). Any intentional object can appear by means of a variety of possible intentional acts (e.g. I can see, imagine, describe or dislike *the tree*). Since it is uncommon for Buddhist scholars to address this distinction, their accounts of mindfulness tend to involve an important philosophical ambiguity. As a result, it is often difficult to determine whether they understand mindfulness to be a special way of engaging with the objects of our experience, or whether it is more a question of how we

1. With the phrase 'the Pāli *sutta*s', I am referring to the following texts from the *Sutta-piṭaka*: *Dīgha-nikāya*, *Majjhima-nikāya*, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, *Suttanipāta*, *Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka*, *Thera-therīgāthā*.

engage with the subjective act itself. Is mindfulness a new way of attending to the worldly objects we encounter, or is it our self-awareness of the subjective act of relating to these worldly objects? Dreyfus (2013), for example, describes mindfulness as a decidedly object-oriented exercise. Mindfulness, he says, involves paying close attention to an object, keeping one's attention fixed on it without losing it (p. 47). He does, however, suggest that 'the function of mindfulness is not just to keep in touch with whatever is present in the ken of attention but also includes the not drifting away from the wholesome and unwholesome mental states' (p. 45). But is it right to characterise these mental states as things that one's attention should not drift away from? Surely it would be more phenomenologically accurate to describe them, not as objects of one's attention, but as properties of the intentional act.

The distinction between object and act is acknowledged by Bodhi (2013). He characterises it in terms of two poles: 'the objective datum and the subjective act that cognizes it' (p. 32). The establishing of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), he says, 'involves not only mindfulness but a constellation of mental factors that work in unison' (p. 21). Nevertheless, despite the attempt to include the intentional act in his account, it is obvious that he takes mindfulness as being primarily concerned with the clarity of the intentional object. Mindfulness, he says is a 'lucid awareness' that 'makes the apprehended object stand forth vividly and distinctly before the mind' (p. 25). Mindfulness, according to this interpretation, 'involves a close repetitive observation of the object' (p. 21) that results in a vivid presentation of the objective data of our experience. The implication is that when someone is not mindful, the 'apprehended object' lacks lucidity or vivacity.

Despite what the experts say, the descriptions of mindfulness that we encounter in the Pāli *sutta*s do not say anything about giving close attention to a meditation object, or about the extent to which this object is vivid and distinct before the mind. Probably the most important text for our purposes is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (M I 55), which describes how a monk cultivates mindfulness. A monk for whom there is mindfulness of in and out breathing (*ānāpānassati*) is described thus:

> While breathing in long, he knows: 'I am breathing in long'. While breathing out long, he knows: 'I am breathing out long'. While breathing in short, he knows: 'I am breathing in short'. While breathing out short, he knows: 'I am breathing out short'. (M I 56)[2]

Reading closely, mindfulness of breathing does not require me to focus my attention on an object, the breath. Rather, if I am mindful of breathing, I know that I am breathing while I am breathing. The difference is subtle but crucial. How the breath actually manifests in my experience is beside the point. The aim is to develop a special relation to the intentional act, not the intentional object. Breathing is something that I am doing. Of course, while I am breathing, I am also doing other things. For example, I am sitting down, I am looking at the screen of this laptop, I am typing these words, I am wondering whether I should go and drink some water, I am living in Sri Lanka, and so on. I am always doing many things. The cultivation of mindfulness requires a slight change of attitude towards whatever it is that I am doing. Ñāṇavīra (2010, p. 150) describes this shift in perspective as follows:

> Instead of being fully absorbed by, or identified with, our action, we must continue, without ceasing to act, to observe ourselves in action. This is done quite simply by asking ourselves the question 'What am I doing?'

In order to develop *ānāpānassati*, I do not need my breath, as the object of my attention, to take on a special form, to become lucid or vivid. In fact, as we shall see later, I do not actually need to be

2. *so satova assasati, satova passasati. dīghaṃ vā assasanto 'dīghaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto 'dīghaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā assasanto 'rassaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto 'rassaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti…*

specifically attending to my breath in order to be mindful that I am breathing. I simply need to know that I am breathing while I am breathing. I need to remember the fact that I am breathing. Buddhist scholars (e.g. Bodhi (2013), Dreyfus (2013), Gethin (2013), Levman (2017) and Anālayo (2018)) are well aware that the Pāli word *sati* is related to the Sanskrit *smṛti*, which MW defines as 'remembrance, reminiscence, thinking of or upon… calling to mind… memory.' It is also related to the Pāli verb *sarati*, 'to remember'. However the relevance of remembering to mindfulness either tends to be downplayed (e.g. 'we should not give this excessive importance' (Bodhi 2013, p. 22)) or else thought of as being a later by-product of one's activity of paying close attention to an object (e.g. 'mindfulness enhances memory' (Anālayo 2018, p. 1)). Even Levman (2017, p. 136), who argues for the centrality of the notion of memory at the semantic core of the word *sati*, says that mindfulness is 'inconceivable without a solid foundation in memory'. But it is not so much that mindfulness *is supported by* remembering, or that remembering *is supported by* mindfulness. Mindfulness *is* remembering a feature of my experience that is so close to me that I tend to overlook it. For as long as remembering is exclusively thought of as what we do when we recall something from the past (such as, as Levman (2017, p. 127) suggests, remembering what we have learned about the teachings of the Buddha), its relevance to mindfulness will remain obscure. Cultivating mindfulness of breathing requires me, not to remember what I did in the past, but to remember the fact that I am breathing right now. This is something that most people tend to forget.

The same principle, of not forgetting what I am doing while I am doing it, can be seen in the various other exercises in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. For example: 'While sitting down, he knows: "I am sitting down"' (M I 56–57).[3] Not only am I sitting down right now, but I also *know* that I am sitting down. This is something that is easy to lose sight of, but if I wish to be mindful of my bodily posture, all I need to do is ask myself: 'What am I doing with my body right now?' As soon as I ask the question, I find that the answer is already there—an answer that on some level I already knew; I had just forgotten.

Mindfulness is knowledge of one's intentional acts, while one is engaged in those acts. But what do we mean by 'act'? The normal, everyday meaning of the word 'act' must not be confused with the meaning of 'act' in the phrase 'intentional act'. The latter is not exclusively a matter of what I am doing, but also includes what I am seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, remembering, desiring, worrying about, and so on. Thus, I can develop mindfulness in different ways, in response to the different intentional acts that I am currently engaged in. I can, as A II 45 tells us, develop mindfulness by knowing what I am perceiving, what I am feeling or what I am thinking. I do this, not by trying to fix my attention onto the object of my perception, feeling or thought, but by knowing that there is currently an intentional act of perceiving, feeling, or thinking whatever it is that I happen to be perceiving, feeling or thinking. 'Here I have to ask myself "What am I feeling, or perceiving, or thinking?", and the answer, once again, will immediately present itself' (Ñāṇavīra 2010, p. 150).

In the case of feeling, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* expresses this as follows: 'While a monk is feeling a pleasant feeling, he knows: "I am feeling a pleasant feeling"' (M I 59).[4] Again, what is important here is not the particular way in which the object of my feeling (e.g. a pleasant feeling) shows up in my experience, but whether or not I am aware of the fact that I am feeling this particular feeling. There is, according to M I 500, always a feeling present: a pleasant feeling, an unpleasant feeling or a neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling. Any experience I can possibly have (leaving aside the cessation of perception and feeling) has to be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. When I am mindful, not only is my experience, say, pleasant, but I am also aware that I am experiencing pleasure.

The *sutta*s describe mindfulness as knowledge of our intentional acts. Contemporary interpretations of mindfulness, as we have seen, tend to emphasise the way in which the intentional objects manifest in

3. *nisinno vā 'nisinnomhī'ti pajānāti…*
4. *bhikkhu sukhaṃ vā vedanaṃ vedayamāno 'sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vedayāmī'ti pajānāti…*

our experience. This shift in emphasis can be traced back to the *Visuddhimagga*. In the Pāli *sutta*s, the word *kammaṭṭhāna* (literally, 'situation' or 'place' (*ṭhāna*) of 'action' (*kamma*)) is used to refer to the field of work within which a man earns his living: 'by farming, trade, cow-herding, archery, royal-service, or some other craft' (A IV 281).[5] Much later, around nine centuries after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, we find the word *kammaṭṭhāna* in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* having acquired the more technical meaning of 'meditation object' (Vism 271). According to Anālayo (2019a, pp. 16–17), mindfulness is established 'in such a way that it faces (*abhimukha*) the meditation object (*kammaṭṭhāna*)'. We are told that 'the Buddha took up the breath as a meditation object' (Anālayo 2006, p. 135). I believe it would be better to avoid using the expression 'meditation object' in this way, in order to stress the fact that mindfulness, as it is described in the early Buddhist texts, concerns our relation to the act of breathing, perceiving, feeling, thinking, etc., rather than to an object. The *sutta*s, after all, managed perfectly well without it.[6]

According to Stone and Zahavi (2022), the ambiguity regarding object and act is also at play in the literature on the issue of 'dereification' (e.g. Lutz et al. (2015)), the claim that mindfulness can help us to stop 'reifying' our thoughts so that we no longer experience them as real objects in the world. How, precisely, is this supposed to be understood? Is the target of the dereification supposed to be our intentional act of thinking, or the intentional objects that we think about? The first option only makes sense if people do in fact confuse their subjective act of thinking with objects in the world. But this is a very strange assertion to make. Surely we are all perfectly capable of distinguishing between the tree that we are thinking about (which is green) and our act of thinking about that tree (which, clearly, is *not* green). As Stone and Zahavi (2022, p. 348) say, 'that kind of mistake would seriously compromise our ability to act in the world'.

If it is not the first option, then presumably it must be the second. The claim must be that mindfulness can help us to stop reifying the intentional objects that we encounter in the world. The tree that I can see, the robe I can feel on my body, the almsfood I remember receiving this morning, the conversation I need to have tomorrow—these, apparently, should not be seen as real things out there in the world, but merely psychological constructs of my mind. As Stone and Zahavi (2022, p. 348) point out, this flies in the face of what we have learned from phenomenology. One of the central tenets of Husserlian phenomenology is the recognition that my intentional acts (seeing, hearing, remembering, anticipating, etc.) are always *about* or *directed towards* something. Consciousness can only ever be a consciousness *of* something—namely: an intentional object. Intentionality is this *aboutness* or *ofness* of consciousness. Importantly, the unavoidable intentional structure of our conscious experience is also evident in the Pāli *sutta*s. According to A III 412–416, there can only be perception, feeling and action if there is contact (*phassa*). And what is contact? It is the combination of one's bodily senses, consciousness and—crucially—all of the external (*bāhira*) worldly objects (e.g. M III 281). In order for me to have perceptions of visible things (*rūpasaññā*), perceptions of audible things (*saddasaññā*) and perceptions of tangible things (*phoṭṭhabbasaññā*), there have to be visible things (*rūpā*), audible things (*saddā*) and tangible things (*phoṭṭhabbā*) out there in the world. In order for me to see a tree, there has to be a tree. The *sutta*s, like phenomenology, offer a way of thinking 'which actually reaches up to the things themselves' (Husserl 2001, p. 178).

Both phenomenology and the Pāli *sutta*s clearly distinguish between intentional acts and the objects of these intentional acts. Mindfulness, as described in the *sutta*s, is not a matter of de-objectifying the objects of our attention. Once one accepts the fact that mindfulness, according to the early Buddhist teachings, involves knowing the intentional act within which the intentional object can be discerned, then the notion of dereification becomes irrelevant. I do not cultivate mindfulness by learning how to

5. *yadi kasiyā, yadi vaṇijjāya, yadi gorakkhena, yadi issatthena, yadi rājaporisena, yadi sippaññatarena…*
6. For further discussion of this change in the meaning of *kammaṭṭhāna*, see Akiñcano (2019, p. 131).

attend to worldly objects in a new way, but by developing what I am calling *reflexive self-awareness*: the knowledge of the fact that I am doing, perceiving or feeling whatever it is that I am doing, perceiving or feeling.

3 Bare attention

I now want to turn to Stone and Zahavi's (2022) phenomenological examination of the concept of bare attention. According to Bodhi (2013, p. 28), the first person to use the term 'bare attention' to refer to mindfulness was his own teacher, Nyanaponika Thera, who described it thus:

> Attention or mindfulness is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or by mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc.), judgement or reflection. (Nyanaponika 1962, p. 32)

There are, broadly speaking, two separate issues that need to be addressed here. The first concerns the use of the word 'attention' to define mindfulness, the second concerns the word 'bare'. In what follows, I hope to show that neither of these two words is appropriate for a phrase that is supposed to be describing the meaning of the word *sati*.

3.1 Mindfulness is not attention

It should be noted that Nyanaponika, in the above quote, uses the words 'attention' and 'mindfulness' interchangeably. He claims that anyone who wishes to use 'the breath as the primary object of mindfulness' (Nyanaponika 1962, p. 120) should aim to keep their attention on it for as long as possible.

> The point where one should fix one's attention is the nostrils against which the breathing air strikes, and one should not leave that point of observation because here one can easily check the entry and exit of the breath. (p. 120)

This appears to be a very common understanding of *ānāpānassati*, held by meditation teachers and academics alike. Despite the fact that Buddhist scholars such as Bodhi (2013), Dreyfus (2013) and Anālayo (2020) are perfectly aware that the Pāli terms *manasikāra* ('attention') and *sati* ('mindfulness') have somewhat different meanings in the *sutta*s, they all refer to mindfulness as the activity of paying attention to something. Dreyfus (2013, p. 47), as we have seen, says that mindfulness is 'the paying close attention to an object'. Bodhi (2013, p. 30) refers to mindfulness as the process of 'sustaining attention on the object'. In an article that specifically compares attention and mindfulness, Anālayo (2020) points out some important differences between the two, such as the fact that attention is a continuous feature of our experience, while mindfulness is sometimes present, sometimes absent. Nevertheless, he still concludes that there is a 'considerable degree of overlap' and that the development of both *satipaṭṭhāna* and *ānāpānassati* 'require attending to what happens in the present moment' (p. 1137).

Anālayo is quite right to say that attention is ever-present.[7] I am always attending to something. That is to say, there is always something, some *object* of my attention, that is the primary focus of my *act* of attending. What this also means is that while I am attending to this thing, there are lots of other

7. However, he goes on to say that while attention may sometimes be a prominent feature of our experience, 'at times, the ever-present function of attention is more in the background of the overall mental event in which it occurs' (Anālayo 2020, p. 1133). This statement highlights yet another example of the conflation of intentional objects and intentional acts. Would it not be more accurate to say that it is the object that I am or am not attending to that is in the foreground or background of my experience—not attention itself? The act of attending is not an object that I can attend to.

things that are *not* the centre of my attention. All of those other things that I am not currently attending to are part of the background of my experience. Of course, I can turn my attention towards some object that is currently peripheral so that it now becomes the focus of my attention, and what had previously been the focus now recedes into the background. What is the centre of my attention, what is in the background—all of this changes. What does not change is the fact that my experience can always be characterised by this essential and unavoidable figure-ground structure. Whenever I 'pay attention to' (*manasikaroti*) something, there is always a background of other things that are not the focus of my 'attention' (*manasikāra*).

Attending to something (and, therefore, not attending to something else) is not the same as being mindful of it. According to the Pāli *sutta*s, mindfulness is the knowledge of what I am doing (or thinking, or perceiving, etc.) while I am doing (or thinking, or perceiving) it. The question that must now be asked is this: is it possible to know that I am doing, perceiving, remembering, or anticipating something *while I am not specifically attending to it*? A moment's reflection reveals that it is. Consider the following example. Imagine, it is Monday morning and you are late for work. You rush into the kitchen to get your car keys. Your partner is sitting at the table, leisurely eating breakfast. You quickly grab a slice of toast, place it in your mouth and start walking towards the door to leave. Your partner says: 'Don't forget, you said you'd drop that package off at the post office'. Now, there are two possible scenarios. First, it is possible that you have forgotten about agreeing to go to the post office. 'Oh yes,' you say. 'Thanks for reminding me.' However, it is also possible that you have not forgotten. In this scenario, just before your partner spoke you were not actually attending to your plan to go to the post office; you were attending to the car keys, the slice of toast and how late you are. Even so, you are mindful that you need to go to the post office this morning. 'Yes, I haven't forgotten,' you say. The intention to go to the post office is there in your experience and you are aware of it. You know that it is there even though it is not the focus of your attention.

According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, to be mindful of my breathing is to know that I am breathing while I am breathing. That is not quite the same thing as attending to my breathing. Of course, the act of attending to my breathing results in the knowledge that I am breathing. However, I do not stop breathing when I stop attending to it. Even if I move my attention away from my breathing in order to attend to something else, the breathing is still there in the background of my experience. If 'mindfulness of breathing' and 'attending to breathing' were the same thing, then in order to cultivate mindfulness of breathing I would not be able to move my attention away from my breathing in order to deal with all the other things that demand my attention throughout my day. But they are not the same thing. To cultivate mindfulness of breathing I must understand that the breathing is there in my experience *whether I attend to it or not.*

These two phenomena—(1) focusing on an object and (2) reflexive self-awareness—are not only different; they are in a sense incompatible. If I focus all my attention on one particular object and try to become deeply absorbed into this thing, I find that I start to lose sight of other things. I start to forget the bigger picture, the larger context that this particular object happens to be situated within. The more I become absorbed in an object, the less mindful I am, the less aware I am of what I am doing. A meditation teacher who tells me to attend to a meditation object, to focus in on this one thing and disregard everything else, is in fact leading me away from mindfulness. If they want to help me to be mindful, they should instead be encouraging me to remember what I am doing; and what I am doing is not an object that I can focus my attention on. My act of attending to something will always be peripheral to the object of my attention.

Ñāṇamoli (2021, 2022) has a very similar view of this. Mindfulness, he says, can only be properly understood—and, therefore, properly cultivated—on the basis of what he calls the principle of 'peripheral

awareness'. Of course one can attend to one's breathing, but this is not how one cultivates *mindfulness* of breathing. 'You don't need to stop doing what you are doing in order to breathe. But you certainly can refuse to allow yourself to be absorbed into what you're doing so that you forget that breathing is happening in the background' (Ñāṇamoli 2022, p. 108). To develop mindfulness of breathing I must cultivate the ability to bear my breathing in mind while it endures in the background, while I attend to this thing or that thing. When I am mindful of breathing I can attend to other aspects of my experience, but I do not allow myself to become fully absorbed by them to the extent that I forget that I am breathing. Ironically, it is quite possible for a meditator to be so absorbed by the touch of the breath against the nostrils that they forget what they are doing.

Similarly, mindfulness of the body should not be understood as 'an observational technique of watching sensations, but being aware of it as a peripherally enduring bag of skin' (Ñāṇamoli 2022, p. 63). The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (M I 56) tells us that a monk who is mindful of the body sees his body in three different ways: he sees it as something 'right here' (*ajjhattaṃ*), he sees it as an object 'out there' (*bahiddhā*) in the world, and he sees it as something that is both 'right here and out there' (*ajjhattabahiddhā*). As I have shown elsewhere (Akiñcano 2025), this involves seeing that even though my body is something that can be attended to, something external that can become the object of my attention, there is also something about my body that escapes my grasp because it is always in the background of whatever it is I am attending to. A crucial aspect of my body is the fact 'that it is never truly in front of me, that I cannot spread it out under my gaze, that it remains on the margins of all my perceptions' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 93). To be mindful of my body 'right here' I must recognise—and remember—that it remains there, in the periphery, on the other side of what I am currently attending to.

But although mindfulness should not be confused with fixing one's attention on an object, the Pāli *sutta*s do provide a way in which we can relate the phenomenon of attention (*manasikāra*) to mindfulness (*sati*). At A V 113–115, the Buddha says:

> A lack of mindfulness-and-awareness, monks, also has a nutriment, I say, is not without a nutriment. And what is the nutriment for a lack of mindfulness-and-awareness? It should be said: non-originary attention (*ayonisomanasikāra*)… Mindfulness-and-awareness, monks, also has a nutriment, I say, is not without a nutriment. And what is the nutriment for mindfulness-and-awareness? It should be said: originary attention (*yonisomanasikāra*)…[8]

Here the word *sati* is given as part of the compound *satisampajañña*. An examination of the meaning of the word *sampajañña* would take us beyond the scope of this current article, though I have translated it as 'awareness'. Fortunately, we do not need to concern ourselves with it here to grasp the broader point: that mindfulness is made possible by a particular kind of attention that the Buddha called *yonisomanasikāra*, which I am translating as 'originary attention'. PED defines this as 'fixing one's attention with a purpose or thoroughly, proper attention'. According to Anālayo (2007, p. 809), it means 'attention that is thorough or penetrative, and therefore also wise'. He uses the word 'penetrative' because he believes that the word *yoniso* 'conveys the idea of penetrating through the outer surface of phenomena… and realising the true nature of what is found beneath the surface' (p. 809).

The idea that *yonisomanasikāra* is a penetrative, laser-focused attention that digs down deep into what is below the surface feeds into the story of mindfulness as an exercise in focusing one's attention on an object. But this is not what mindfulness is. According to the Pāli *sutta*s, mindfulness is reflexive self-awareness of what one is doing, while one is doing it. Penetrating below the outer surface of the

8. *asatāsampajaññan'tissa vacanīyaṃ. asatāsampajaññampāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sāhāraṃ vadāmi, no anāhāraṃ. ko cāhāro asatāsampajaññassa? 'ayonisomanasikāro'tissa vacanīyaṃ… satisampajaññampāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sāhāraṃ vadāmi, no anāhāraṃ. ko cāhāro satisampajaññassa yonisomanasikāro'tissa vacanīyaṃ…*

object of my attention cannot possibly help me to remember what I am currently doing. What we need is an interpretation of *yonisomanasikāra* that allows us to see how it serves as a necessary condition for the development of self-awareness. I will now offer such an interpretation. As Anālayo (2007, p. 809) explains, '*yoniso* derives from *yoni*, which means "womb", a "matrix", or a "place of origin"'. However, instead of taking this, as Anālayo does, to indicate that what makes attention *yoniso* is the fact that it penetratively and thoroughly burrows down into the origins of the thing that I am focusing on, I want to suggest an alternative direction. If I focus my attention on an object and I am absorbed by it to the extent that I lose sight of the broader context that has made this object possible, then my attention can be described as 'non-originary' (*ayoniso*). I am not aware of the place that this object has originated within. As A V 113 says, non-originary (*ayoniso*) attention is the basis for non-mindfulness (*asati*). On the other hand, if, while I am attending to whatever it is that I am attending to, I am also simultaneously aware of the bigger picture, the more encompassing context that makes this particular object of my attention possible, then my attention can be said to be 'originary' (*yoniso*). For example, in order for me to be mindful of my breathing, I cannot be absorbed in the particular objects that grab my attention. I must have a perspective on my situation whereby not only am I, in this moment, attending to this particular thing, but I am also—*at the same time*—sensitive to the background breathing without which there would be no object of attention. I am aware of the origin of what I am attending to. My breathing, which the object of my attention depends on, is not deep down below the surface of the intentional object. It is there in the background, peripheral to it. Seeing this, instead of being absorbed in the object of my attention, I now have an originary perspective, aware of the peripheral breathing that is an essential condition (or *yoni*) of this object. Now, all I need to do is remember that background, not lose sight of it, not become distracted from it. In this way I can develop mindfulness.

3.2 Mindfulness is not bare

Having determined that it is wrong to equate mindfulness with attention, we must now ask if the adjectives 'bare' and its near synonym 'non-judgemental' are suitable descriptors. As Stone and Zahavi (2021, p. 164) observe, it is not always clear in this discussion what the term 'judgement' is supposed to mean. What exactly is attention meant to be bare of? One possibility—the most radical interpretation—is the idea that it refers to any attribution of meaning whatsoever. This, for example, is what Nyanaponika (1962) seems to have in mind when he describes bare attention as 'obtaining the bare object' (p. 34), perceiving the object 'pure and simple' (p. 35), 'bare of labels' (p. 34), having eliminated all subjective judgements such as 'beautiful or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant, useful, useless or harmful' (p. 35). The aim of meditation, according to this view, is to go back to 'the seed state of things' (p. 33), and apprehend the raw meaningless sense-data, 'things as they truly are' (p. 34) in their original form, before we furnish them with meaning.

There is little I need to add to Stone and Zahavi's (2022) rejection of this position. A basic principle at the heart of all phenomenological philosophy is the idea that meaning is an essential, inescapable feature of our experience. In the words of Heidegger:

> It is not the case that objects are at first present as bare realities, as objects in some sort of natural state, and that they then in the course of our experience receive the garb of a value-character, so that they do not have to run around naked. (Heidegger 2001, p. 69)

There is never anything that I meet that does not have some kind of significance. Without my having to go on a mental detour through a conceptual examination, what I perceive can only ever be perceived in its intelligibility, *as* something-or-other, *as* beautiful or strange or even incomprehensible.

At all times, everywhere I look, everything comes at me already loaded with meaning, within the world of meaning (Heidegger 2008, p. 58).

But there remains a weaker claim for the bareness of mindfulness that must still be addressed. Even though someone might concede that things always come with what Heidegger (1962) calls the 'as-structure'—that is, within the world—they may still want to argue that mindfulness, while not a complete suspension of all meaning whatsoever, sometimes, or in some way, involves bracketing off evaluations, judgements, conceptual categories, memories, etc. Many meditation practitioners believe that such bracketing helps them to become fully open to immediate sense experience. Consider, for example, what Bodhi (2013, p. 26) has said.

> There are certainly occasions when the cultivation of mindfulness requires the practitioner to suspend discrimination, evaluation, and judgement, and to adopt instead a stance of simple observation.

According to this view, mindfulness meditation is seen as something which, at least sometimes, interrupts and is disconnected from one's capacity to discriminate between right (*sammā*) and wrong (*micchā*). Yet there is nothing in the *sutta*s that supports this. Why would the Buddha encourage us to develop mindfulness if it prevented us—even only on certain occasions—from developing wisdom (*vijjā*) and virtue (*sīla*)? Instead, the *suttas* repeatedly show how both wisdom and virtue are bound up with, inseparable from, and necessary conditions for mindfulness. For example, at A IV 110–111, the Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper in the king's fortress, keeping out strangers and only admitting friends in order to protect the inhabitants. So too, a noble disciple is mindful: 'With mindfulness as his gatekeeper, the noble disciple abandons what is harmful and develops what is beneficial, abandons what is blameworthy and develops what is blameless' (A IV 111).[9] If *sati* is the answer to the question 'What am I doing?', then *sīla* is the answer to the normative question 'What *should* I be doing?' (Ñāṇavīra 2009, p. 43), and this requires wisdom. If we wish to follow the teachings of the Buddha, both questions must always be there, at the back of the mind, framing and informing the choices we are constantly making. Since we are always responsible for our choices (A III 73), even while cultivating mindfulness we must continue to judge between what is beneficial (*kusala*) and what is harmful (*akusala*), and restrain ourselves when necessary. The ability to to do this, according to M I 46, requires the right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*). Right mindfulness can only be cultivated on the basis of virtue and right view.

> 'Venerable sir, may the Blessed One teach me the *Dhamma* in brief…' 'Well then, monk, clarify the very beginning of beneficial phenomena. And what is the beginning of beneficial phenomena? Virtue that has been well purified, and a view that is straight. Monk, when your virtue is well purified and your view is straight, because of that, monk, based on virtue, supported by virtue, you should develop the four ways to establish mindfulness…' (S V 143)[10]

The four ways to establish mindfulness (i.e., the four *satipaṭṭhāna*s) are called 'right mindfulness' (S V 9–10). I cannot develop right mindfulness unless I have already purified my virtue (which according to M I 345 includes, for example, observing celibacy) and I have 'a view that is straight' (*diṭṭhi ujukā*). According to the famous epithet of the *Saṅgha* (e.g. M I 37), one who is practising straight (*ujuppaṭipanno*)

9. *satidovāriko, bhikkhave, ariyasāvako akusalaṃ pajahati, kusalaṃ bhāveti; sāvajjaṃ pajahati, anavajjaṃ bhāveti…*

10. '*desetu me, bhante, bhagavā saṃkhittena dhammaṃ…' 'tasmātiha tvaṃ, bhikkhu, ādimeva visodhehi kusalesu dhammesu. ko cādi kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ? sīlañca suvisuddhaṃ, diṭṭhi ca ujukā. yato kho te, bhikkhu, sīlañca suvisuddhaṃ bhavissati diṭṭhi ca ujukā, tato tvaṃ, bhikkhu, sīlaṃ nissāya sīle patiṭṭhāya cattāro satipaṭṭhāne… bhāveyyāsi.*'

is practising well (*suppaṭipanno*), practising properly (*samicippaṭipanno*), and is 'one of the four pairs, the eight kinds of individuals'.[11] These are the noble ones. Throughout the *sutta*s, a line is drawn between the ordinary person (*puthujjana*), who remains a victim of suffering, and the noble disciple (*ariyasāvaka*), who has found the escape. The difference between right mindfulness (*sammāsati*) and wrong mindfulness (*micchāsati*) is the difference between being a noble disciple and not being a noble disciple.

> Ignorance, monks, precedes the attainment of all harmful phenomena… For one who has not arrived at wisdom, monks, for one who is not wise, wrong view arises. For one with wrong view, wrong thinking arises. For one with wrong thinking, wrong speaking arises. For one with wrong speaking, wrong acting arises. For one with wrong acting, wrong livelihood arises. For one with wrong livelihood, wrong effort arises. For one with wrong effort wrong mindfulness arises… But, monks, wisdom precedes the attainment of all beneficial phenomena… For one who has arrived at wisdom, monks, for one who is wise, right view arises. For one with right view, right thinking arises. For one with right thinking, right speaking arises. For one with right speaking, right acting arises. For one with right acting, right livelihood arises. For one with right livelihood, right effort arises. For one with right effort, right mindfulness arises… (S V 1–2)[12]

Wrong mindfulness (*micchāsati*), which is supported by wrong view (S V 1), is different from *a lack of* mindfulness (*asati*), which is supported by non-originary attention (A V 113). There is a lack of mindfulness when I am attending to something without any awareness of the broader context that this thing is contained within. If I adopt an originary perspective on my situation, sensitive to the background of whatever it is that I am attending to right now, then by remembering that background I can cultivate mindfulness. However, for as long as I do not have the right view, for as long as I do not know the escape from suffering, for as long as I remain a *puthujjana*, then this mindfulness will be wrong. Even if I am mindful of something that outlines the entirety of the situation I find myself in (such as the fact that whatever I do, I am breathing), my mindfulness cannot be correct if the essential nature of my situation has not been seen correctly.

The right view, or outlook, that one acquires upon entering the *Dhamma* is described as the knowledge that 'whatever has the nature to appear, all of that has the nature to cease' (e.g. S V 423).[13] For example, this breathing that my whole life depends upon is—just like all other things—impermanent. It appeared at some point (when this body took shape in my mother's womb) and it will, at some point I know not when, come to an end. Mindfulness of breathing, as we have seen, is not a matter of staring at my nostrils for as long as possible. I develop mindfulness of breathing by remembering that whatever I do, whatever I perceive, whatever happens to me, all of this is dependent upon, made possible by, this breathing that I continue to do whether it is the object of my attention or not. If I am no longer a *puthujjana* and am now one of the noble disciples, having 'arrived at wisdom' (S V 2), then because my understanding of the nature of breathing is right, my mindfulness of breathing is right. There will still

11. *cattāri purisayugāni, aṭṭha purisapuggalā…*

12. *avijjā, bhikkhave, pubbaṅgamā akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ samāpattiyā… avijjāgatassa, bhikkhave, aviddasuno micchādiṭṭhi pahoti; micchādiṭṭhissa micchāsaṅkappo pahoti; micchāsaṅkappassa micchāvācā pahoti; micchāvācassa micchākammanto pahoti; micchākammantassa micchāājīvo pahoti; micchāājīvassa micchāvāyāmo pahoti; micchāvāyāmassa micchāsati pahoti… vijjā ca kho, bhikkhave, pubbaṅgamā kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ samāpattiyā… vijjāgatassa, bhikkhave, viddasuno sammādiṭṭhi pahoti; sammādiṭṭhissa sammāsaṅkappo pahoti; sammāsaṅkappassa sammāvācā pahoti; sammāvācassa sammākammanto pahoti; sammākammantassa sammāājīvo pahoti; sammāājīvassa sammāvāyāmo pahoti; sammāvāyāmassa sammāsati pahoti…*

13. *'yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ, sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman'ti.*

be times when there is a lack of mindfulness.[14] Nevertheless, whenever there is mindfulness, on account of my right view, that mindfulness will be right. With the right mindfulness of breathing established, not only am I remembering the background breathing, the context of my life that persists even when I am not attending to it, I also see that it is unreliable and could come to an end at any moment, from any direction, for whatever reason. Even though I may not be currently attending to my breathing, I have not forgotten that it is there, and I am fully aware that this in-breath or out-breath, upon which this whole experience depends, *could be my last.*

4 Conclusion

Stone and Zahavi (2021, 2022) have provided us with a very useful phenomenological critique of the concept of mindfulness. The primary target of their work was the version of mindfulness that features in contemporary psychological literature: mindfulness as non-judgemental and present-centred awareness. However, the issues they raise are also extremely pertinent for whoever wishes to appraise the way in which mindfulness is spoken of by scholars of Buddhism, meditation teachers and figures within the various lineages of the Buddhist tradition. In order for us to have a phenomenologically valid model of mindfulness, a clear distinction must be made between the objects of our perception, attention, belief, worry, expectation, desire, etc. and the subjective acts of perceiving, attending, believing, worrying, expecting and desiring. Once this difference is clarified, a study of the Pāli *sutta*s reveals that mindfulness is not a matter of focusing one's attention on an object (despite what all the later Buddhist literature says) but of becoming reflexively self-aware. Although some Buddhists may balk at this use of the word 'self', it cannot be denied that the *sutta*s describe mindfulness with the first-person singular: knowing what *I* am doing while *I* am doing it. It would be vain to hope that the insight 'all things are not-self' (Dhp 279)[15] can be gained simply by ignoring what one is doing and refusing to use the word 'self'.

Once one accepts that mindfulness is not developed by focusing one's attention on an object for as long as possible, but by remembering the answer to the question 'What am I doing, feeling, perceiving, etc.?', it follows that mindfulness cannot be called 'bare attention'. There are two reasons for this. First, the practice of mindfulness is not merely a matter of attending to something, but of knowing that something is present in my experience whether I am attending to it or not. This requires a certain kind of attention—which the Buddha called *yonisomanasikāra* and which I have translated as 'originary attention'—that involves attending to whatever it is that I am attending to while I am also simultaneously aware of the larger context that forms the background of my experience. For as long as I am attending to something in this 'originary' way, it is possible for me to remember, bear in mind, not lose sight of that background context. In other words, if there is originary attention then there can be mindfulness. Second, not only is mindfulness not attention, neither is it bare. While one is dwelling mindfully, one must continue to discriminate between wholesome and unwholesome, understanding—at times, perhaps, contemplating—the nature of what is present. Right mindfulness can only be said to be right if it has been developed on a foundation of the virtue and right view of the noble ones.

To conclude, I would like to return to Stone and Zahavi's (2021, pp. 179–180) contention that mindfulness and phenomenology are fundamentally different kinds of activities. This may seem like a reasonable claim if, on the one hand, mindfulness is thought of as something one does when one sits down on a meditation cushion, with eyes closed and legs crossed, following the instructions of

14. Consider, for example, the fact that a noble disciple still requires sleep. According to a number of *sutta*s (e.g. D III 209), even the Buddha slept. Falling asleep is a kind of forgetting, a loss of mindfulness of the situation we are in. Eventually, however, we remember where we are and what we are doing, mindful once more that we are lying on our bed. We call this phenomenon of remembering 'waking up'.

15. *'sabbe dhammā anattā'ti.*

some gently spoken guide, while, on the other, phenomenology is conceived of as intellectual analyses developed in philosophy classrooms and then consigned to books. But how accurate are these clichés? Phenomenologists often speak of philosophy, not as an abstract academic enterprise cordoned off from the real world, but as a way of life, a mode of being-in-the-world. According to Hadot (1995, p. 266), this hinges on the distinction, made by the Stoics, between 'discourse about philosophy' and 'philosophy itself'. Discourse about philosophy provides theories, separated into parts (e.g. logic, metaphysics, ethics), that must be examined and reflected upon. Philosophy itself, however, is a unitary act performed by those whose goal is not merely to get tenure, but to radically transform their whole way of being—to stop theorising about how one ought to act, speak and think in order to start actually acting, speaking and thinking in a correct and just way. Evidence of both an analytic moment and a protreptic moment, characteristic of ancient philosophy, can be detected in the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger (Hadot 1995, p. 272; Sheehan 2015, p. 155).

Similarly, the concept of mindfulness that I have proposed in this article, as it is portrayed in the Pāli *sutta*s, looks nothing like a meditation technique requiring sustained focus on an object. Right mindfulness is 'first and foremost a philosophical enterprise' (Vörös 2021, p. 15). It is the reflexive enquiry of an individual who has not only gained the right perspective on what it means to live life well, but is also actually following through with this by conducting themselves blamelessly and irreproachably. On the basis of this right view and purified virtue, no matter what they do, they remain aware of the overall context of their experience. They do not lose sight of the whole, even while they are engaged with one particular aspect of the whole.

By these lights, the difference between mindfulness and phenomenology does not seem so large. Consider Hadot's (1995, p. 273) description of the ancient lover of wisdom.

> Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world, and does not see the world *qua* world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality.

This account of the sage does not involve the ontological distinction that the early Buddhist teachings draw in manifold ways between the understanding of an ordinary person and the understanding of a noble disciple. Still, when compared to the concept of bare, non-judgemental attention fixed onto a meditation object, it stands much closer to the image we find in the *sutta*s of a practising monk.

> He should not be greedy with sense desires,
>
> He should be undisturbed in mind.
>
> Skillful in all things,
>
> A monk should wander about mindfully. (Sn 1039)[16]

16. *'kāmesu nābhigijjheyya, manasānāvilo siyā. kusalo sabbadhammānaṃ, sato bhikkhu paribbaje'ti.*

Abbreviations

A	*Aṅguttara-nikāya*
D	*Dīgha-nikāya*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
M	*Majjhima-nikāya*
MW	Sanskrit-English Dictionary (see Monier-Williams (1899))
PED	Pāli-English Dictionary (see Rhys David and Stede (1921–25))
S	*Saṃyutta-nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta-nipāta*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*

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