

Introduction

*Jana S. ROŠKER**

In the past few decades, the meditation technique of mindfulness has been gaining popularity in the West with regard to promoting psychophysical health and well-being. This originally Buddhist concept has also been investigated and widely applied as a very effective tool in numerous fields, such as psychology, ethics, cognitive neuroscience, psychotherapy, counseling and education. However, despite its strong social relevance, current research into applications of mindfulness lacks appropriate theoretical models. In the last decade only a few meta-studies on mindfulness research have been carried out, identifying the main methodological problems. As such, comprehensive theoretical presentations of mindfulness are still required, positioning it into its scientific, epistemological, ethical and phenomenological framework. Besides, numerous scholars, who criticize the ways in which the original Asian concept of mindfulness has been (mis)construed, have recently questioned its explosive growth in popularity and the often superficial methods of transferring mindfulness into Western cultures and societies. They especially point to the dangers of “mystifying mindfulness” by withdrawing it from its traditional frameworks and transforming it into a decontextualized superficial “self-help” method.

In order to increase the knowledge and understanding of these ancient Asian techniques and to improve their application in contemporary society, the present issue of the journal *Asian Studies* focuses on the concept of mindfulness, its traditional and modern definitions and interpretations, as well as its current use in scientific, psychotherapeutic and philosophical theoretical contexts. The contributions collected in this special issue are thus not only limited to investigations of the philological, epistemological, ethical and phenomenological frameworks of this notion, as represented in classical Buddhist literature. Instead, they also aim to relate these conceptualizations and practices to contemporary scientific, therapeutic and educational contexts.

The premises upon which modern science is based (as well as the methodological procedures that emerge from it), are in their essence still part of the unquestionable

* Jana S. ROŠKER, Professor, Department of Asian Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.
jana.rosker[at]ff.uni-lj.si



discourses of the Western academic tradition. Here, we have noted the need to revitalize the classic categories and concepts of Asian theories. As such, the basic epistemological methodology applied in this issue avoids the use of incommensurable methods that attempt to study Asian cultures through the lens of Western concepts and categories.

Because the modern applications of these techniques are a rather new phenomenon, we would also like to propose a highly relevant and original contribution to this new area by developing novel links and forming new connections between the contemporary scientific research on the one hand, and classical Asian philosophical and religious discourses on the other.

Within the broader context outlined above, several authors of the present volume focus in particular upon the position of mindfulness in cognitive processes: its pragmatic functions, general characteristics and ethical implications. The latter are especially relevant for contemporary globalized societies, which are largely trapped within a network of axiological problems, linked to alienation and the so-called “vacuum of values” which has emerged as an undesirable side effect of the omnipresent post-capitalistic and neo-liberal pursuit of profit. As we will see, the notion of ethics is also very relevant in relation to the recently introduced distinctions between the “secular” and originally religious notion of mindfulness, which raises several axiological questions.

The structure of this special issue is based on three broad areas. The first investigates traditional developments of the notion of mindfulness in India and China, the second focuses on the problems and possibilities of its intercultural transmission, and the last deals with diverse applications of mindfulness based meditation techniques in the realm of psychology and cognitive studies.

The volume opens with Tamara Ditrich’s article *Situating the Concept of Mindfulness in the Theravāda Tradition*. Her contribution examines the theoretical background of the concept of mindfulness (*sati*) as presented in the early Buddhist sources, recorded in Theravāda Buddhism. It shows how mindfulness has a special role as a component on the Buddhist path to liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) and how it is integrated into the soteriological and ethical goals of Buddhist practice. This paper is followed by Jana S. Rošker’s article entitled *Mindfulness and its Absence – The Development of the Term Mindfulness and the Meditation Techniques Connected to it from Daoist Classics to the Sinicized Buddhism of the Chan School*. It deals with various modifications of the term mindfulness on its long journey from India to China. First, the author introduces the central sinicized meditation practices derived from Indian Buddhism. Afterwards, she focuses on the development of the original etymological meaning of the term mindfulness, especially upon the

later semantic connotations of the concept *nian* 念, which represents a Chinese synonym for the term *sati* (Pāli) or *smṛti* (Sanskrit), from which it is translated into awareness (in most Indo-European languages) or mindfulness (in English).

The second area examined in this journal is covered by four articles. This section begins with Sebastijan Vöröš's *Sitting with the Demons – Mindfulness, Suffering, and Existential Transformation*, an article in which the author tries to critically evaluate various objections directed towards the application of mindfulness in contemporary societies. First, he analyses the claim that de-contextualized approaches may have serious ethical consequences, and he then explores the suggestion that it may be spurious to construe mindfulness meditation as (merely) a form of relaxation and/or an attention-enhancing technique, as it is sometimes accompanied by various negative or dangerous phenomena. The author concludes that mindfulness meditation can be seen as an important element, but by no means the sole component, of a broader process of overcoming existential *angst*, and that the goals of such processes cannot be reduced to relaxation or enhanced attention, but should rather be understood as a form (or possibility) of radical existential transformation. This article is followed by Andrej Ule's contribution entitled *Mindfulness and Self-Deliverance to Pure Presence*, which is also founded upon a critical analysis of contemporary representations of mindfulness. Proceeding from the original Mahayana Buddhist notion, the author distinguishes its original form, which clings to various methods and differentiations, and the higher form, which is occurring in Now-ness beyond anything that one achieves and does. He shows that within this framework, meditative concentration always involves both the internalisation of experiencing and an awareness of what is going on around and within us. In this sense, practising mindfulness implies passing beyond effort, practice, aims and goals, and beyond the dualism of bondage and liberation.

The next article in this section on the problems and possibilities of intercultural transmission is Hashi Hisakis's *The Logic of "Mutual Transmission" in Huayan and Zen Buddhist Philosophy – Toward the Logic of Co-existence for a Globalized World*. In this paper, the author deals with an important methodological question underlying the intercultural transformations and interactions of originally Buddhist concepts. She critically questions the notion, which is still common in many discourses on Asian studies throughout the Western world, that there was less "philosophy", "logic" and "rationality" in the history of East Asian Cultures before the beginning of their modernization. This prejudice is explored through the lens of Huayan and Zen Buddhist Philosophy, and the author clearly states the importance of its alternative model of logic, which can be, according to her, be denoted as "*logicus spiritus* (心の論理)". This section ends with Nadja Furlan Štante's paper

on *Mindfulness as a Path of Women's Empowerment*, in which she tries to establish a theoretical connection between social mindfulness as a path of female empowerment, and feminist spirituality within the concept of the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all beings.

The last section of this issue contains three essays dealing with the concept of mindfulness within contemporary psychological and cognitive studies. In his contribution entitled *Applications of Mindfulness in Psychotherapy – Contemporary Dilemmas*, Borut Škodlar focuses on the central dilemmas, problems and controversies in the fast, almost fanatical spread of mindfulness-based techniques, which, according to him, compensate for a certain deficit or lack of reflection in modern Western societies, and is based on an idealization of “Oriental Wisdom.” The main purpose of his paper is to contribute to the critical reflection in studying and applying mindfulness in psychotherapy. Anja Zalta's *Contribution of Buddhist Mindfulness to the Transformation of Conflicts – Dependent Origination (paticca-samuppāda) and Deconstruction of Identity*, on the other hand, examines the modern concept of mindfulness with regard to conflict and transformation. The author points to the fact that in traditional Buddhist understanding conflict is the result of defensiveness and misconceptions. In this context, the main purpose of mindfulness is to achieve a lasting, radical change in perception, which suspends habitual processes and thus enables identification with the sensory and mental experiences of an isolated, radically individualized notion of the Self.

The last article in this special issue is entitled *Parallels between Mindfulness and First-Person Research of Consciousness* and was written by Olga Markič and Urban Kordeš, who consider the possibilities of using mindfulness as a scientific method in the field of cognitive sciences. Their paper offers some interesting suggestions as to how these two discourses might benefit one another, also placing stress upon the ethical aspects of this possible synthesis. The authors thus point to the ways in which Buddhism might contribute to scientific research, and vice versa.

Most of the authors of the present volume are Slovenian researchers working in different disciplines, reaching from the humanities, through social and cognitive sciences, to medicine and psychology. Some of the papers collected in this volume represent translated and reworked elaborations of articles that have been written in Slovene for an anthology on a similar topic (i.e., *Mindfulness: Tradition and Contemporary Approaches*), which was published as a special issue of the Slovene academic journal *Poligrafi*. Precisely because of the significance and the wide impact of the research results published in that journal in Slovenia, the editorial board has decided to include these papers in the present volume, in order to make them accessible to a broader international academic public.

The findings of the research presented in this issue, originally pertaining to different theoretical disciplines within sciences and the humanities, will certainly provide some valuable strategies for a more successful integration of mindfulness into various scientific, educational and psychotherapeutic practices. A crucial goal of the present issue is thus also to open new possibilities for creating innovative forms of improved, safe, effective and reliable techniques of mindfulness-based meditation and related practices. We also hope that the findings collected in this volume can contribute to greater social responsibility and engagement, as well as to a more responsible attitude towards social and ethical issues.

Jana S. Rošker, Chief Editor