

Mindfulness or *Sati*? An Anthropological Comparison of an Increasingly Global Concept

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This article offers a comparison of some of the meanings of mindfulness in secular US settings and Theravāda Buddhist communities of South and Southeast Asia. Based on ethnographic data gathered from over 700 psychiatrists, Buddhist monks, lay practitioners, and others in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the United States, the article suggests some key mental associations in mindfulness and *sati* that converge and diverge across different cultural contexts. I call these the “TAPES” of the mind: relationships that mindfulness and *sati* have to particular conceptions of Temporality, Affect, Power, Ethics, and Selfhood. The article examines each of these “TAPES” and their expressions in the field in turn, from the temporal significance of “remembering the present” to the effects of supernatural and political potencies, to the morality of practice and the ontological status of the self. I argue that when the two terms are used interchangeably some meanings of these associations become privileged, while others are effectively erased. I conclude with a discussion of the problems of hegemonizing discourses about mindfulness, and the implications of the findings for global health and Buddhist studies.

Keywords: mindfulness; Thailand; Myanmar; Sri Lanka; *sati*; temporality; affect; power; potency; ethics; morality; self; supernatural; Southeast Asia; South Asia; Theravāda; meditation

“**B**ut how did you stay so calm in the cave?” Ellen Degeneres asked a group of soccer players from Northern Thailand in June 2018.¹ The boys had recently been rescued from a flooded cave in an ordeal that captured international media attention. “We practiced mindfulness,” they answered, speaking in Thai and using the Pali term *sati* to refer to the increasingly popular global Buddhist concept. Ellen nodded thoughtfully, as the translator explained. “Meditation is so key,” Ellen said: “Amazing.”

¹ <https://mindfulnesswaytohappiness.com/mindfulness-meditation-saved-the-thai-soccer-team>

There was a moment of recognition in Ellen’s nod, and in the boys’ comment, the translator’s words, and in the viewers watching from home. There was a shared sense that mindfulness was understood by all involved, evoking a feeling of global Buddhist connection to meditation and the resilience that enabled the boys to handle their time trapped inside. As a Wall Street Journal article describing the ordeal put it, “Thai Cave Rescue Highlights the Importance of Teaching Children to Meditate” (Wallace, 2018).

In Thailand, as in the United States, Buddhism was seen as an important part of the cave rescue’s success, from the practices of mindfulness by the boys themselves to the spiritual interventions of powerful monks nearby. Caves are a potent site of mythical religiosity in the Buddhist imaginary; they are found in ancient legends of meditative practitioners residing in caves at the tops of mountains, in stories of ghosts living at cave entrances—such as the ghost princess said to live near the cave the boys were trapped in—and in the recent case of a monk who spent 3 years in isolation in a cave in Myanmar to develop his powers of mind, eventually helping the boys through his acquired powers (Jirratikorn, 2016; Bizot 1980). These references were part of the story in Thailand, but while the image of the cave and its associated religious dangers and opportunities for spiritual engagement aided the international intrigue that surrounded the rescue, they were left out of many of the international accounts.

Ellen had said that meditation is key, but what, exactly, is so “key” about it? What kinds of ideas were at play in Ellen’s mind when she responded as she did, and in the boys’ minds, and in the minds of those watching it on TV, or of those who watched it on YouTube after the show aired? What kinds of associations are evoked when mindfulness is raised in Thailand, and for those in other countries following the kinds of Theravāda Buddhist teachings from which mindfulness has grown? How might these look different from what is evoked when mindfulness is discussed in the United States? And what might these differences tell us about cultural and psychological variability within an increasingly global Buddhist practice?

In order to answer these questions, I spent two years conducting a large ethnographic project on mindfulness’ meanings and practices in Buddhist communities of South and Southeast Asia (henceforth, South-East Asia). I gathered data from a total of 720 informants comprised of groups of monks, students, psychiatrists, and villagers in Chiang Mai (Thailand), Mandalay (Myanmar), and Kandy (Sri Lanka), three areas from which the Theravāda forms of Buddhism that spawned today’s global mindfulness movement are practiced by the majority of the people (Braun 2013; Cook 2010).²

² See Braun (2013) and Cook (2010) for analyses of mindfulness’ global emergence from popular lay meditation movements in Southeast Asia. See the Majjhima Nikāya 10, Crosby and Khur-Yearn (2010), Thanissaro (2010), Soma Thera (1941), Shulman (2010), and Anālayo (2003) for more on mindfulness in Buddhist teachings, and the historical and contemporary practice of translating *sati* as mindfulness. Some place and informant names have been changed to protect anonymity. Data was collected in the local languages in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, where the Pali term *sati* was used in Thai, Sinhala, and Burmese. All quotes here are translated from the Thai, Sinhala, and Burmese by the author and research assistants. *Sati* and mindfulness are typically used as translations of each other, both in scholarly texts and popular culture (e.g., Crosby 2013’s careful discussion of this topic); here I have kept the Pali term intact to highlight the divergences between the terms. In *Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia*

For global comparison I also gathered data from participants in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, where mindfulness has become an increasingly popular technique for mental health and development. Almost all of my informants in Theravada Communities in South-East Asia offered their thoughts in the local languages of Thai, Burmese, and Sinhalese, respectively, and spoke of what is often translated as mindfulness using the Pali term *sati*. *Sati* and “mindfulness” are not identical to each other, of course, nor does each term reflect a single meaning in any one location. Yet the terms are often used interchangeably, in scholarship and by informants familiar with both languages, and it is assumed that they relate to a similar phenomenon. Exploring how they differ—from each other and within the same term across locations and contexts—is one of the goals of this essay.

In analyzing the more than 2,000 pages of data that resulted from the study, five specific areas of similarity and diversity arose. I call these the “TAPES” of mindfulness: relationships that the concepts have to particular ideas about Temporality, Affect, Power, Ethics, and Selfhood. The term “TAPES” is meant as a ready-at-hand mnemonic acronym, an easy shorthand to remember what may be, in their own ways, some of the concepts’ most salient associations. They are not meant to be exhaustive of the similarities and differences across the regions, but rather to offer a guide for understanding some of the complexity revealed in mindfulness and *sati* across cultural contexts. Further work within the regions of the study and in additional cultural contexts would offer welcome additions to these “TAPES,” and reveal new associations.

I wrote up the findings of the study at length in *Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia* (Cassaniti 2018). Here I provide an overview of each of the “TAPES” in turn, along with some illustrative examples from the field, first addressing similarities and then differences in each area across the four field sites. I emphasize here a regional South-East Asia comparison to the United States to better highlight regional global trends, though I also found significant diversity within each site and group of informants. At the end of the essay I offer a discussion of what these findings may tell us about the cultural variability of the mind in Global Buddhist thought, and the significance they have for understanding diversity in mindfulness’ potential for health and resilience. I recognize that there are many nuances of meaning in Buddhist and secular discourses about mindfulness, both in South-East Asia and in the United States, and in *Remembering the Present* I am more explicit in investigating these nuances; in this short essay I am painting in broad strokes to make a point about general similarities and some important differences. These similarities and differences remind us that there is no “right” or “wrong” understanding of mindfulness; they speak instead of the importance of situating any mental practice, including that of mindfulness, within a cultural framework. One of my aims is to challenge the often-unexamined assumption that there is a single, secular, a-cultural definition of mindfulness, and to point instead to the importance of understanding power-laden divergent, often overlapping meanings. My central point is that if we assume there is a single universal definition of mindfulness we will fail to recognize the culturally specific ways that the term can be mobilized as a strategy for resilience in specific contexts.

(Cassaniti, 2018) I cover the methodology, narratives, and theoretical implications of the current research at greater length.

T- Temporality

One of the most striking similarities in mindfulness across the four locations of the study is a similarly marked focus on the importance of attention to the present moment. In English-language-based contexts, the definition of mindfulness places emphasis on the present: mindfulness, the famous mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests, means “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment . . .” (1994, 4. See also Appel and Kim-Appel 2009; Brown and Ryan 2003; Garland, Gaylord, and Park 2009, 37; Marchland 2012). This presentist focus of *sati* is common in each of the locations I worked in too, and across all groups of informants. One of the most common definitions for mindfulness in Thailand is *ruu tua*, referring to a kind of corporeal, sensorial awareness of the body in space. Similar definitions were offered in Myanmar, where *sati-tha*, “noting” the present moment, was most common, and Sri Lanka, where a sense “focusing on what you’re doing” was the most popular definition. As I was often reminded in South-East Asia, mindfulness is thought of as like “tying the buffalo to the post”, where the buffalo is the mind, and the post is the present. In this way it is very similar to the overwhelming scholarship and empirical accounts that emphasize the present in the United States, where the most common definition of mindfulness is, as a student told me there, to be “in the present moment.”

Within this general shared attention to the present, however, is a relative emphasis on memory in *sati* in South-East Asia, following some of the concept’s historical associations with memory (Gyatso 1992; Kuan 2008; Shulman 2010) but focused within a temporal relationship to the present. “Let’s say you interviewed me here,” one monk explained in Thailand, “and then later I saw you again somewhere but I’d forgotten you. I would use *sati* to remember who you are!” He defined *sati* in a way similar to many in Thailand, as “recollection.” My friend Gaew told me she was about to embark on a 10-day *vipassanā* meditation retreat near Chiang Mai because, she said, “I’ve been really scattered, really forgetful lately.” One monk in Chiang Mai told me that with *sati* “one can even remember past lives!” This attention to the past and one’s relationship to it was not a typical framing in the US Pacific Northwest, where the more common response to mindfulness’ meaning is, as many had put it, “when you’re in the present moment.” The monk in Chiang Mai who had told me about past lives highlighted the conceptual divergence, when he said that “mindfulness is about the present moment, but it’s not just that.”

The relative difference between attention to the present in the United States and an emphasis on the past in South-East Asia in mindfulness and *sati* may be due in part to different perspectives on the temporality of the mind, related to different attitudes about the passage of time. Buddhist teachings about impermanence (Pali: *anicca*) are common in South-East Asia (Cassaniti 2015), and underscore ideas about how mental processes work across temporal space. My field interlocutors in South-East Asia explained how *sati* helps one to accept this fact of impermanence, by focusing attention to the often slight but constant changes of the present moment. In part because of this orientation towards the impermanent nature of time and our relationship to it, the mind that is highlighted in discourse about *sati* in South-East Asia is one that thought to be prone to wander and get ‘stuck’ in the past and future, with *sati* helping it be brought back to the present. The cosmological

underpinnings of mindfulness' relationship to temporality are relatively unelaborated in the United States, but the relative differences in emphasis between the past and the present may point to larger orientations of moral causation and the cyclical nature of being and time in South-East Asia, in contrast to more linear conceptions of individual stability in time that underscore American approaches.

A - Affect

Shared attitudes about affect are also central to the meanings and practices of mindfulness and *sati*. Respondents in each of the field sites and across the different groups of the study explained how they use mindfulness and *sati* to experience emotions that are locally considered to be good and positive ones, and particularly to become and remain affectively calm and 'collected', even during moments of difficulty. In a response typical across all four field sites, a psychiatric hospital staff member told me in Myanmar that, "with mindfulness we'll have a calm mind."

The connection to affective tranquility in mindfulness and *sati* is similar not only in aspirations of calmness, but also in the process through which it is understood to occur. It is a process that involves the development of a trained mental detachment (see Cook this issue, Pagis 2009). "When I'm angry," a monk in Sri Lanka told me, in an illustration of this process of affective detachment, "I actually call myself by name. I say 'now is the time to direct your mind! Now is the time to direct it and watch it and be mindful!' It's like I give a command to my mind. My friends have noticed that I'm often calm even when people treat me poorly. They ask me, 'how are you able to think so calmly?'"

In the Pacific Northwest the use of mindfulness as a way to control emotion was also noted, although the process was not as often elaborated: "I became mindful of my feelings and emotion," an American hospital worker explained, "and it helped me to develop compassion and empathy." "Mindfulness helped me to control my emotions," a student in the US said, in another typical response. In each location I found a shared sense that one can use mindfulness and *sati* to develop calmness, and that this occurs by cultivating a particular mental relationship to affective experience. It involves, to an extent, an attention to feeling states as passing phenomena that are not to be identified with one's self.

Although affective calmness is seen as a good feeling to have across the four sites of the study, and in a similar way is developed through a process of affective detachment, I found a slight difference in what a good and calm affective orientation looks like. People in South-East Asia were relatively more likely to point to an ideal affect developed in *sati* in which one is 'equanimous'—meaning neither positively nor negatively riled—in contrast to a relatively more robust affective ideal in the US, where mindfulness is more likely to be seen as a way to develop 'happiness' (Amutio et al. 2014; Good et al. 2016; Lopez 2012). In the Pacific Northwest I found this emphasis on happiness to be a commonly stated goal when I asked people about the purposes of mindfulness. "Mindfulness is about creating a higher awareness of your surroundings and yourself, and trying to get into a positive mental state," I was told by one American student; "Mindfulness means being happy," another put it; "if you think positive thoughts, good things will come."

In relative contrast, *sati* in South-East Asia points to a relatively unriled, equanimous, affective demeanor. At one point while we were hiking in Thailand I mentioned to my Thai host sister Goy how amazed and happy I was at the beauty of the trail, and in response she warned me to be careful: “Watch out. Joy can be like a bubble, and burst.” I found this to be a common kind of response in South-East Asian descriptions of *sati*, explained in part because happiness can be seen as potentially negative due to its impermanent nature. A psychiatrist in Thailand offered an explanation of this: we can lose our mindfulness, he said, “when things feel extreme, like we’re very very happy, or very very sad.” I asked him as a follow-up question, “But how can being happy cause us to lose our mindfulness?” and in response he discussed at length ideas about suffering and impermanence, in ways I did not hear about often in the Pacific Northwest. “If we’re very happy,” the doctor explained, “we may feel like we’re in paradise, but it’s only a short time and it’s gone. We may think it’s good to be very happy, but at that time we have no mindfulness, and we drop from that state and see the truth in life, and we can’t tolerate it.” He ended his explanation, laughing, “This may be different than in the United States!”

P - Power

Mindfulness and *sati* are both associated with power. Personal power is felt to come from them; across all regions of the study I found a clear consensus that one can gain an improved mental and social mastery through their development. This power is, across regions and terms, largely understood to emerge as a kind of self-improvement and self-resilience, with clear positive effects in one’s life. I heard hundreds of narratives about power, in all four field sites and across the different groups of people I spoke with. “I used to work in a bank before I was ordained,” a monk told me in Sri Lanka, in a particularly evocative incident, “and one day at the end of the work day by mistake I got locked in the vault! I had to have a lot of *sati* at that time, so that I didn’t panic. I was able to get out; *sati* saved me.” This kind of explanation was very common, as a kind of enabling fortitude and mental resilience. They are found in Pacific Northwestern responses of mindfulness as enabling someone, as one person put it, to “control my mind,” or as another said, “to help you endure a lot more than you normally could being unaware.” Through the temporal, affective, ethical, and self-developmental training of mindfulness, mental powers are understood to emerge.

Yet while the power associated with mindfulness and *sati* across the regions of study is clear and pervasive, in the United States it is almost exclusively confined to the empowerment of the individual person for general self-development, and less so at the edges of mental health or to larger social bodies. *Sati* in South-East Asia extends past the individual sphere of self-cultivation to a relatively greater degree, and is articulated to a greater extent to issues of sanity, the supernatural, and the political. An old but still popular song by the band Carabao tells the story of a man in a psychiatric hospital: “I’m not a bad man,” Carabao sings, “I just don’t have *sati*!” While I was conducting research in Thailand my good friend Sen, who at the time was an in-patient at the psychiatric hospital in Chiang Mai, echoed the sentiment: “The reason I’m in here,” he told me one afternoon when I went to visit, “is because I don’t have *sati*. In fact,” he went on, gesturing around

him, “this whole place is for people without *sati*!”³ It is an attitude that resonates with many of the responses I heard in the region, from monks to mental health practitioners, who point to *sati* as being, as one put it, “the bedrock of sanity.”

As with the rest of my informants in South-East Asia, Sen had used the Pali-derived Thai term ‘*sati*’ to refer to what is typically understood in English to be mindfulness. This was how the English term ‘mindfulness’ had been translated in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program that was taking place in the hospital while Sen was there, too. But the similarities and differences in meanings evoked by the two uses of *sati*—one of a patient placed literally behind bars at an institution and the other of an authoritative program implemented by those in charge of that institution—reflects a kind of power dynamics of its own. In privileging the English-language term’s connotations in even the Thai-language document at the hospital, mindfulness and *sati* index different kinds of powers.

The supernatural aspects of *sati* are one of these powers that is relatively more elaborated in South-East Asian discussions of *sati* in comparison to discussions of mindfulness in the United States. Supernatural powers associated with *sati* are prominent in South-East Asia but are relatively understudied, both by western mindfulness advocates, who tend to value more scientific approaches that deny the existence of spiritual energies, and by Buddhist studies scholars and monks, who tend to focus on modernist readings of textual religious teachings that claim such energies to be a dangerous distraction on the path to enlightenment.⁴ Yet I heard a lot of talk about the supernatural connections to *sati* in my fieldwork in South-East Asia. *Sati*’s powers over the supernatural, I was told, result from the mental and spiritual potency accrued through practice, as an extension of the general sanity evoked by mindfulness in mental health. Lay people told me about monks accumulating spiritual and even supernatural power through their meditation, in the kinds of discussions that are relatively absent in discussions of mindfulness in the United States. As a monk in Myanmar put it: “If you have *sati*, well, because you’re relying on your mind, you’re paying attention to your mind, and ghosts can’t approach you. They can’t scare you, they can’t haunt you. Only when you’re without *sati*, when you’re feeling small, feeling sad, can they come and haunt you.” Ghosts, I was told, are connected to the kinds of interpersonal affective energies that one can gain mastery over through the skills of detachment and attention to impermanence in meditative training. This can mean both a mental mastery that keeps ghosts away, as well as a mental mastery in engaging with them; one is understood to be able to harness the accomplishments of meditation for these ends. It is not necessarily that people in the region are more ‘superstitious’ than in the United States; rather, I found that that interpersonal energies are more elaborated in general, in ways that extend past the individual and even past the edges of life and death. In many parts of the world mindfulness is seen

³ I discuss the implications of powerlessness and lack of control that results from a state of mindlessness as a local idiom of distress in Cassaniti (2019).

⁴ See Cassaniti (2018); Cassaniti and Luhrmann (2014) for discussions of what may be gained and lost in the scientific comparison of spiritual experience. See Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw (2019) for a corrective on this trend in the scholarship of Buddhist practice.

as a secular concept, and not Buddhist at all, and almost always it is not connected to spirituality in the sense of spiritual potencies that extend to the supernatural, at least in many of its guises in the United States and elsewhere.

Part of the social powers elaborated in South-East Asian discussions of *sati* also extend past the individual into the political sphere, to a relatively greater degree than in the United States. Rulers in Buddhist-majority countries today, as in the past, promote the association of religious potency with political potency, often claiming moral legitimacy for their rule through the powers associated with Buddhist practice (Flügel and Houtman 2019; Tambiah 1976; Jackson 1989; Jory 2002). *Sati* is understood to be a part of mental powers that can be used politically, for social and not just individual ends, to be deployed to marshal a kind of social, nationalistic solidarity. After the 2014 coup in Thailand, I heard on the radio and from neighbors that the military had executed the coup because people were acting without *sati*, and that the military was “Restoring *sati* to the People.” A year later, a public service announcement by the military general Prayut Chao-o-cha continued this message, suggesting that people should “continue to think with *sati*” and not, he was suggesting, get distracted by opposing viewpoints. The use of meditation to keep oneself (and, importantly, others) out of politics has a long and complex history in the region (Houtman 1999; Sivaraksa 2005), and mindfulness often plays a key role in these power moves. While some public service programs in western contexts also employ mindfulness as a vehicle for political expression, these discourses are largely couched in terms of the enhancing powers of individual self-cultivation, and are largely implicit.

E- Ethics

There is a shared orientation to ethics in mindfulness and *sati*. In the sense that ethics refers to moral principles, and to that which is considered right and wrong, I found the practice of mindfulness and *sati* across all the regions of the study to be seen as an ethical one. In all four field locations mindfulness and *sati* are seen as good to have, and good to improve on, and that practice creates results that are good; these are all ethical stances. When I asked the head monk of a well-known meditation monastery in Chiang Mai to tell me about *sati*, he did so in a way that is a bit more elaborated but essentially typical of many others’ explanations. He stated:

I learned about *sati* just growing up. . . . And as I was learning how to practice it, I saw the benefit of it, how it supports a good life, to improve one’s life, to have energy. Right *sati* helps us to do good, it supports life to be good. It’s good to do, it helps us to be cleaner inside, free from desire and craving, and to improve our minds. It helps us to have a wholesome, positive mind, one that allows us to do good and not bad. It changes a bad mind to a good mind, and a good mind to be even better. When we recall our mind with *sati*, we can change from an unwholesome mind, we can change our wrong desire.

The spirit of the monk’s message in its use of *sati* as part of the ethical project would not seem unusual in an American context of mindfulness. It is not just that it is seen to be good to do, but also that it creates a more moral person through its practice, in having an end goal that is seen as a moral

good. Although this moral aspect of mindfulness is relatively unelaborated in the United States, where its ethical expression is most salient in programs of mental health and wellness, both *sati* and mindfulness are understood to be part of ethical endeavors, often found within culturally elaborated and ethicized technologies of the self.

Yet although there is a shared ethical quality to mindfulness and *sati*, the morality of mindfulness differs from *sati* in the relative ethical orientation it has to present moment awareness. In the United States the “non-judgmental” emphasis of mindfulness is almost as much a part of the concept’s central definition as is its emphasis on the present. Even as its advocates are very passionate about the potential of mindfulness as a moral tool, students of mindfulness in the United States are often admonished when learning about mindfulness that they must not pass judgment on an action; instead, they are instructed to watch it, and recognize it as fleeting (King 2019; Hall et al. 2011; Michal et al. 2007; More and Malinowski 2009; Baer 2003; Praissman 2008; Nauriyal et al. 2006). As one student framed it in the Pacific Northwest, echoing the sentiment of many, “Mindfulness is about being aware of the things around you instead of having your own perspectives on them.” Another said, “Mindfulness is about being aware of your surroundings and the different ideas and beliefs and opinions in it; it’s being open-minded.” The non-judgmental aspect of practice is such a foundational part of what mindfulness looks like that I found it often unelaborated in explanations of the idea, but it is a significant component of secularized mindfulness settings and suggests a different ethical lens than is common in discussions of *sati* in South-East Asia.

In South-East Asia the ethical quality of *sati* is one of the most common and most discussed aspects of the concept, with its goodness part of and not just an effect of practice. *Sati*’s ethical elaboration offers what is perhaps the most robust contrast I found when comparing my South-East Asian *sati* and American mindfulness findings. *Sati* is not only seen as ethically good to do in the majority of the interviews in South-East Asia, with good results seen to follow its practice, but one is also understood to be ethically engaged when practicing it. Morality is often framed as a central part of *sati*’s definitions, as when I was told in Myanmar, “if something happens, we will know it is right or it is wrong, and that [moral] knowing is called *sati*.” An elementary school book I found, used to teach six-year-olds in the public schools of Thailand, even says as much: “The Buddha taught people to not do bad deeds, and to do good ones instead, to make the mind clear and pure through *sati*.” People start to learn about the ethical component to *sati* at a young age, and this component is elaborated on as one grows. *Sati* is considered one of the wholesome acts that define good Buddhist practice, and as the 7th of the eight points on the Eight-fold path, it is seen to be a part of wisdom, tied to morality through the precepts (or principles) that Buddhists in the region aspire to follow. One monk in Thailand explained the connection this way: “The precepts are like discipline, they’re the method for making one mentally healthy. Keeping the precepts allows for concentration to rise, and from there wisdom follows. It’s like a chain. It’s like three friends together who don’t separate: morality, concentration, and wisdom [including the wisdom of *sati*].” As ‘three friends’ linked in a chain, *sati* is understood to be part of ethical action, indexing a moral causal cosmological framework

that looks relatively different, and more elaborated, than the emphasis on non-judgment that is found in many American understandings of mindfulness.

S - Selfhood

Finally, mindfulness and *sati* are both in large part about self-development, though what selfhood looks like varies between the terms and in different contexts. “When I practice *sati* I can stabilize myself,” a monk told me in Thailand, in a typical response that I encountered in each field setting. A student in Myanmar offered a similar emphasis: “*Sati* is to not forget what you’re doing, like, that dog is going to bite you. . . . [It helps you] take care of yourself!”

Within its general framing as a self-project, which I encountered across South-East Asia and the US, I also found some shared perspectives in conceptions of what the self looks like that are developed through practice, as well as shared perspectives on how this occurs. These shared attitudes about the self in *sati* and mindfulness include an emphasis on the fleetingness of the self-concept, the value of selflessness, and the importance of not getting stuck or attached to ideas about the self. The idea that it can be detrimental to the self to wish things to be a certain way is understood to underscore mindfulness and *sati* in all of the sites of the study, whether this means wishing things to stay as they are and to identify with them, or to wish them gone and from that suffer from their continued presence; practicing mindfulness and *sati* is understood to decrease the ill effects of self-attachment. I found a clear sense of self-cultivation though non-attachment in mindfulness and *sati* across the fields of the study.

Yet within a generally shared focus on the development of the self there is a relatively different ontological status that selfhood takes when one talks about *sati* and mindfulness in South-East Asia and the United States. In addition to the more individual focus in the United States discussed above, in the United States mindfulness is often connected to the cultivation of and realization of one’s self as a stable and constant entity that can become enhanced through practice. Similar to scholarship that suggests that mindfulness works through “enhancing well-being and awareness of the self” (Hamilton et al. 2006: 124), “self-knowledge” (Carlson 2013: 176), or becoming a more “authentic” self (Ryan and Brown 20013: 71), people I spoke with in the Pacific Northwest tended to suggest that, as one student put it, mindfulness “helps you get in touch with your spirit, your inner being.” “For me,” an older man who leads a Buddhist meditation program and couched his interview in a more explicitly Buddhist framework told me, “mindfulness . . . is a spiritual path, a personal development journey.”

In South-East Asian discussions of *sati* I found this emphasis on the self to be relatively less common. Instead, a relatively different kind of relationship to the self emerges. Even as the self is evoked as benefiting from practicing *sati*, this selfhood is understood to reflect what in ‘ultimate’ terms is no substantial self at all.⁵ This sense of self is understood to be base-less, and ultimately

⁵ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1964) popularized this distinction between what he called ordinary and ultimate language. McMahan (2017) shows how ethical variations in mindfulness practice derive from differing cultural conceptions of

without substance (Collins 1982; Cassaniti 2017). The Buddhist idea of non-self (*anattā*) is often described as a difficult concept to understand, and its connections to mindfulness vary, but in general I found that part of what mindfulness does is to help one realize the truth of non-self. Drawing from Theravāda Buddhist teachings, a student at Chiang Mai University told me, in a response that was more elaborate but typical of others, “If we use *sati* to consider things, we’ll learn that things are not self. To practice *sati* is to know how to control the breath. When we breathe in and breathe out, if we have *sati* we’ll learn that these breaths in and out are impermanent because the breath goes away. I think that *sati* helps us to learn that everything is impermanent, and if we understand these concepts we’ll understand non-self.” Conceptions of the self connected to *sati* in South-East Asia—from the teachings of non-self to the spirits of the self that are said to disperse in times without *sati*—look different than those evoked in mindfulness in the United States. When one cultivates themselves through mindfulness and *sati*, what that looks like in practice depends on cultural, ontological ideas about the transience and stability of the self.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this short overview of some of the associations that mindfulness and *sati* have to issues of temporality, affect, power, ethics, and selfhood, mindfulness and *sati* may share some qualities, and they may also vary in important and culturally patterned ways. Many of the “TAPES” I have drawn out here are interrelated; culturally variable conceptions of the self may also help to explain ethical associations, and temporality becomes implicated in affective orientations. These and other interconnections suggest broad cosmological differences underpinning mindfulness’ meanings in different cultural contexts, such as the nature of time, and role of the person in society.

Attending to these “TAPES” helps us to appreciate some of associations that are at play when people raise the concept of mindfulness in discussions about meditation and resilience in Buddhist practice. It may help us understand what Ellen and the boys from the cave rescue were thinking about when they evoked the calming, resilient powers of meditation. Ellen and many of her viewers may have been thinking about the boys meditating on the present moment, creating a positive affective calmness, and engaging in non-judgmental self-empowerment. The boys and their coach, who had been quickly trained to be instant ambassadors by a Thai government positioning them for global Buddhist consumption, may also have had these connotations in mind. But for them and for many of those consuming media in Thailand the power of mindfulness and *sati* for Buddhist resilience had a slightly different set of associations than it did in the minds of Ellen and her American audience, ones that did not as readily enter the framework of mindfulness in a US context. For them it may have been understood to have helped to bring the mind back from its wandering to the past and future, and to have helped them to create a neutral calmness through a moralized and interpersonal, de-personal potency, evoking a movement of spiritual energy quite different from that understood by their international audience.

the self; there are many conceptions of the self at play in both American and South-East Asian Buddhisms, and this difference in relationships to the self in mindfulness and *sati* is complex.

I have emphasized some of the many differences I found to be part of mindfulness and *sati* in different cultural contexts, but the similarities matter too: for most people I spoke with, both call for an attention to the present, an affective calmness, and an ethical, empowering force underscoring the practice. Both the similarities and divergences help us to make sense of what Ellen may have been thinking when she spoke to the boys from the cave rescue, and what they and we all might have been thinking when they answered.

The associations they evoke are, importantly, less about correct or incorrect connotations of an increasingly global concept, and more about the diversity of cultural values and assumptions about what the mind looks like when it is trained in practice.⁶ They speak to the assumptions about the mind that are carried along with mindfulness' increasing use, particularly as the concept continues to serve as a translation for, or significant influence from, the concept of *sati*. The associations matter especially as the use of mindfulness and *sati* travel along lines of power and prestige, not just in the region of South-East Asia but globally, for understanding the broader global range of what mindfulness can and does offer. As mindfulness becomes a more globally salient concept, and its circulation becomes more rapid and far-reaching, avoiding a single, hegemonic reading that privileges Western orientations to mentality becomes more and more important.

When I recently heard that there was a mindfulness-based therapeutic intervention being administered to staff at the psychiatric hospital in Chiang Mai I rejoiced, thinking of my friend Sen staying as a patient there, and his comment to me there that it was a place that people went “without *sati*.” Yet when I spoke with the staff member running the program, I saw from the Thai-script papers she was using that the program being administered was a direct translation of Jon Kabat Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction program, including translating ‘mindfulness’ into ‘*sati*’, which carries with it many of the Western assumptions about the mind I have laid out here. All of the staff I spoke with at the hospital know about mindfulness and think it is good to have, but they did not always prioritize incorporating it into their practices, and particularly not in ways that would especially resonate with their patients' understandings of it. Most of the professional staff in psychiatric hospitals in South-East Asia are from the countries' capital cities, or went to school there, and align with an urban, globalized elite of scientists and modern thinkers who find mindfulness to be legitimate as a therapeutic tool particularly, or only, when it is couched in its Western guise.⁷

An intern from Colombo that I interviewed at the psychiatric ward of the Kandy Hospital in Sri Lanka had recently gone through a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) seminar at Colombo University, for her postgraduate work in counseling and clinical psychology. “Mindfulness is, I suppose, to keep the mind in the present moment,” she told me, in one of the few English-language interviews I conducted in South-East Asia: “It's being able to go back to the past with a few

⁶ See Skilton, Crosby, and Kyaw (2019) for more on the cosmological structures that underscore models of the mind in Buddhist contexts. Aulino (2020) highlights the interaction of some of these models of mind in Buddhist and Christian communities in Thailand, and Luhrmann (2020) discusses models of the mind further in a broader global comparative lens.

⁷ This follows a process that Ethan Watters refers to as “the globalization of the American psyche” (2010).

changes. . . . It's being in the present." As the intern framed the concept in the terms she had learned in her MBSR program, she was also troubled with the task of trying to move it away from some of the term's Buddhist resonances, and applying the concept, which she would do by speaking of it in the local language as *sati*, to patients with different kinds of religious backgrounds. She had learned, in other words, the kind of associations that mindfulness has for Ellen DeGeneres and her viewers, and was aware that the changes she was asked to make in the concepts' meaning would fit in different ways for her mostly Buddhist and Muslim patients.⁸

The individualistic, secularized, western view of "mindfulness," though itself diverse, seems to be becoming increasingly hegemonic at the global level, even with some of its generalized Buddhist connotations left indirectly intact. This is as important for the field of mental health as it is for Buddhist Studies. If one thinks of the mind as something that can be affected by the energies of spiritual others, for example, or as something that can be developed through an attention to the impermanence of the self, and if these are left out of the mindfulness therapies they undergo, the full potential of what mindfulness training may offer will be missed. This is what happened to my friend Sen in the psychiatric hospital in Chiang Mai, who was told about mindfulness using a set of "TAPES" that did not speak to the associations of the mind that he may have most benefitted from. It is what was lost too in the translation of mindfulness for the boys rescued from the cave on the Ellen DeGeneres show. The global hegemony of some associations over others means that the mind that is developed through what we call mindfulness comes to be crafted in some ways over others. Rather than see mindfulness in a globalized Western guise as 'denuded' of its cultural and religious undercurrents, while South-East Asian practices of *sati* maintain them, this study shows that wherever mindfulness (or *sati*) is practiced it carries assumptions about the mind with it. By attending to the cultural and religious associations that mindfulness and *sati* have to ideas about temporality, affect, power, ethics, selfhood and more, as I have done here, we can become more inclusive of the variety of ideas about the mind circulating around the world, and of mindfulness' potential as a global psychological tool for health and well-being.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Nalika Gajaweera, Darcie DeAngelo, Emily Zeamer, Somwang Kaewsufong, Santi Leksakun, Justin Van Elsberg, Kate Crosby and the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their contributions to this article. The project was supported by a Seed Grant at Washington State University and a Visiting Fellowship at the University of Cambridge.

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⁸ The intern was noticing what many other medical and religious specialists are also beginning to notice (e.g., Hinton et al. 2013; Kirmayer 2015) about the need to attend to cultural meanings in mindfulness.

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