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**Title: “Beyond the Limitations of Decontextualized Applications of Mindfulness:
Utilizing All Three Trainings of Buddhism without Normative Claims”**

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I. Introduction: The Modern Mindfulness Movement and the Three Trainings¹ of Buddhism

Traditionally the Buddhist path is summarized in terms of a) the Three Trainings of conduct, concentration, and wisdom,² or in terms b) the Eightfold Noble Path that is itself arranged within the elements of the Three Trainings, with *prajñā* stated first, instead of last. This is taught, for example, as follows in the *Middle Length Discourses* by Dhammadinnā, whom the Buddha said was the foremost nun in expounding the teachings:

[T]he Noble Eightfold Path is included by the three aggregates. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood, these states are included in the aggregate of virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, these states are included in the aggregate of concentration. Right view and right intention, these states are included in the aggregate of wisdom.³

This can be summarized as follows:

¹ Sanskrit: *śikṣātraya*; Pāli: *tisikkhā*.

² Sanskrit: *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*; Pāli: *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*.

³ *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, original translator, Bhikkhu Bodhi, editor/reviser (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995) p. 398 and n. 459.

The Three Trainings and the Eightfold Noble Path

Three Trainings	Noble Eightfold Path
1. <i>Prajñā/Paññā</i> : Wisdom	1. Right View
	2. Right Intention
2. <i>Śīla/Sīla</i> : Conduct	3. Right Speech
	4. Right Action
	5. Right Livelihood
3. <i>Samādhi</i> : Concentration	6. Right Exertion
	7. Right Mindfulness
	8. Right Concentration

In the modern mindfulness movement, not only is it common to use a limited form of mindfulness that draws minimally from the rich tradition of Buddhist meditation methods and practice instructions, but its presentation of mindfulness is decontextualized even more by excluding any reference to conduct and wisdom. This decontextualization is well-intended in being motivated by the wish to make the benefits of mindfulness more widely available, by presenting it in a form that is more acceptable and attractive to people who might otherwise be put off by more traditional presentations. From a Buddhist perspective, one could say that this use of mindfulness is praiseworthy, since there is documented research that this approach does benefit a broader audience—such as in improving a person’s ability to work with chronic pain—and since Buddhism is deeply concerned about reducing the suffering of beings. However, there is the issue of whether the effectiveness of mindfulness in non-traditional settings could be significantly increased by joining mindfulness with ethical reflection and the development of wisdom, without being “religious” or particularly “Buddhist.” Has the mindfulness movement hampered its own effectiveness with such a restrictive use of mindfulness that does not benefit from all three trainings?

This paper will explore this issue through discussing (I) how the three trainings are understood to interact and support each other, and the benefits of presenting mindfulness with ethics and wisdom, and (II) then examining how elements of all Three Trainings could be presented in a non-normative manner in non-Buddhist contexts. “Non-normative” is used here to mean that Buddhist teaching and methods could be presented in language that (1) is not particularly religious, (2) does not need to be identified as specifically Buddhist, (3) is presented as perspectives on, or models of, human experience that could be explored for their potential usefulness by most anyone, and (4) does not presume the material presented is normative for how people should understand their experience. In other words, a “non-normative” approach can present Buddhist-based material in an open-ended manner that invites people to consider their own experience in light of the perspectives shared with them. It is up to them whether they

partially or fully agree or disagree with the perspectives presented for their consideration. They can come to their own understanding based on their own examination, in light of hearing the insights of other participants and the facilitators.

Since many of the compassionate applications of mindfulness are in non-Buddhist contexts, especially in the West, there is understandable avoidance of a normative, dogmatic, or declarative approach to presenting Buddhist-related ethical reflection and teachings. In a non-normative approach, one could raise ethical issues for people to consider that are related to difficulties they are experiencing, presented in conjunction with teaching them mindfulness techniques, without declaring how they should normatively view the ethical issues. This style of non-normative exploration of Buddhist teachings is how Buddhism is often taught in the West, where an inherited deference to Buddhist teachings is absent. With the spread of materialism and capitalism in traditional Buddhist countries, there are, presumably, an increasing number of people with a distant connection to Buddhism. Thus, a non-normative approach to teaching Buddhist principles might be more effective with some Asians as well, whether in Buddhist contexts or not.

Care professionals—e.g., therapists, chaplains, social workers and so on—who adapt Buddhist-inspired mindfulness techniques to care-giving contexts and who have some level of knowledge of Buddhism and experience with Buddhist meditation may well be non-verbally modeling and implicitly verbally teaching Buddhist ethics and view, while engaging in the skillful means of not mentioning that a portion of what they are presenting is drawn from Buddhism, and being careful to use wording that does not reveal their Buddhist roots. That is to say, they are trying to be skillful in communicating with the non-Buddhist or minimally Buddhist clients. This approach may be articulated as “I avoid teaching Buddhist ethics and doctrine,” but it is suggested that this may not, in fact, be what they are doing. It can be argued that it is more skillful and intellectually honest for care professionals to let go of the fiction that they are not teaching elements of Buddhism ethics and view, and consciously acknowledge that they are drawing from, modeling, and teaching such elements of the Buddhist tradition, whether it is named as such or not. It is further proposed that their clients will be better served if care professionals consciously exert themselves to enhance their use of all three trainings—with or without explicitly stating the Buddhist roots of some of their methods and content.

II. The Beneficial Interaction of the Three Trainings

A. All Three Trainings

The Theravāda monk Bhikkhu Bodhi provides a well articulated statement of a classic view of the three trainings in English. He writes that “the path evolves through its three stages, with moral discipline as the foundation for concentration, concentration the foundation for wisdom, and wisdom the direct instrument for reaching liberation.”⁴ More specifically he writes:

⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2nd rev. ed. 1994) 14.

The order of the three trainings is determined by the overall aim and direction of the path. Since the final goal to which the path leads, liberation from suffering, depends ultimately on uprooting ignorance, the climax of the path must be the training directly opposed to ignorance. This is the training in wisdom...Wisdom unfolds by degrees, but even the faintest flashes of insight presuppose as their basis a mind that has been concentrated, cleared of disturbance and distraction. Concentration is achieved through the training in the higher consciousness, the second division of the path, which brings the calm and collectedness needed to develop wisdom. But in order for the mind to be unified in concentration, a check must be placed on the unwholesome dispositions...[that] continue to rule as long as they are permitted to gain expression through the channels of body and speech as bodily and verbal deeds. Therefore, at the very outset of training, it is necessary restrain the faculties of action...This task is accomplished by the first division of the path, the training in moral discipline.⁵

He notes that wisdom, as right view and right intention, occurs first in the eightfold noble path, rather than last, as in the three trainings, because a “preliminary type” of wisdom is needed at the start of the path: “Right view provides the perspective for practice, right intention the sense of direction.”⁶ He also notes that, “With a certain degree of progress all eight factors [and three trainings] can be present simultaneously, each supporting the others. However, until that point is reached, some sequence in the unfolding of the path is inevitable.”⁷ This indicates that a preliminary type of wisdom/understanding and some level of virtuous conduct are needed as supports for initially undertaking meditation. Does the mindfulness movement neglect these supporting factors?

To explore the three trainings in more experiential terms, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, a present-day scholar-meditation master of the Tibetan traditions, provides a succinct description of how one progresses on the path: “Erring and erring, we walk the unerring path.” That is to say, progress on the path involves working with one’s propensity to go astray, namely, working with one’s afflicted mental states, with one’s non-virtuous mental, verbal, and physical actions that arise from those afflicted states, and with the results of one’s actions. The transformation of these elements of human experience is not achieved just by using a minimal mindfulness practice. Traditionally, the most effective way of working with all three of these elements—with one’s afflictions, karmic actions, and karmic results—is to apply all three trainings. Applying just one, or just a simplified part of one as in many modern uses of mindfulness, does not benefit from the synergism, the mutual support, that all three trainings provide each other. The development of ethical insight and of wisdom, both of which involve the study of view, are crucial to such transformation.

⁵ Bodhi, *Noble* 13–14.

⁶ Bodhi, *Noble* 14–15.

⁷ Bodhi, *Noble* 13.

The Khenpo expresses a very skillful view of the path, namely, the understanding that working with one's non-virtuous mental states and actions is integral to progress on the path. Rather than being "proof" that one is incapable of being on the path, one's non-virtuous states and actions are the very working basis for transforming oneself through the path. This is vividly expressed in the essay "The Manure of Experience and the Field of Bodhi," (i.e., the field of awakening) by the Vidyadhara, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was the twentieth century Tibetan scholar-meditation master that founded Naropa University:

It is said, I think in the Lankavatara Sutra, that unskilled farmers throw away their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers, but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish, in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work, and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land, and out of this they grow their crops. That is the skilled way. In exactly the same way, the Buddha says, those who are skilled Bodhisattvas will not throw away desire and the passions and so on, but will first gather them together...recognize and acknowledge them, and study them and bring them to realization...[H]e really knows that he has all these terrible things in him, and although it is very difficult and unhygienic...to work on, that is the only way to start...So out of these unclean things comes the birth of the seed which is Realisation...[O]ne has achieved a certain amount of understanding and that is what is known as real theory.⁸

Trungpa Rinpoche also writes, "It is often mentioned in the Scriptures that without theories, without concepts, one cannot even start [the path]." By "theory" he means a form of wisdom or understanding that develops on the path through interaction with the other two trainings, i.e., with intensive engagement of meditation and of ethical conduct in the midst of one's challenging life. This is evident in the other chapters on conduct and meditation in this book that, after all, is named *Meditation in Action*.

B. The Relationship between the Training of Concentration and the Training of Wisdom/Understanding

The teaching of the Three Wisdoms or Understandings (Skt: *prajñā trividhā*) of the Vaibhāṣika tradition sheds insight into their view of the relationship between the two trainings of wisdom and concentration. They present the three understandings in the order of understanding that arises from hearing, from contemplation, and from meditation, which differs from their order in the Theravāda tradition, which is contemplation, hearing, and meditation.⁹ The Vaibhāṣikas present the Three Understandings (*prajñā*) as three sequential stages of development. Vasubandhu describes their presentation in his *Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośa)* as follows:

(1) The understanding arisen from hearing observes [just] terms.

⁸ Chögyam Trungpa, "The Manure of Experience and the Field of Bodhi," in *Meditation in Action* (Berkeley: Shambhala Publications, 1969) 23–27.

⁹ Sanskrit: *śrutamayī-prajñā*, *cintāmayī-prajñā*, and *bhāvanāmayī-prajñā*. As noted above, these three also occur in the Theravāda tradition, but in the order of *cintāmayā-paññā*, *śrutamayā-paññā*, and *bhāvanāmayā-paññā*.

- (2) The understanding arisen from contemplation observes terms and [their actual referent] objects. Sometimes, words lead to [contemplation of the actual referent] object.
- (3) The understanding arisen from meditation only observes [the actual] object; it engages the object without relying on terms.

For example, the understanding arisen from hearing is like a person who is not properly trained in swimming without a float, who never lets go of what they are holding on to when crossing a river. Understanding arisen from contemplation is like a person with a little training, who sometimes lets go of their float and sometimes holds on to it when crossing a river. Understanding arisen from meditation is like a person who is properly trained, who is able to cross the river without relying upon holding on to a float.¹⁰

In this three stage process, one progress from 1) the conceptual engagement of terms, to 2) alternating a) engagement with terms and b) direct engagement with the actual referent objects of the terms, but without the terms, then 3) to the direct, non-conceptual realization of the actual objects without a need for terms at all. Meditation is directly involved in the developing the deeper levels of wisdom/understanding.

This is very similar to the method used in analytical meditation, or insight meditation, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, as transmitted from the Karma Śrī Nālandā Institute (NSNI) in Sikkim to Nitartha Institute in the US. NSNI is a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic college, and Nitartha Institute is translating NSNI's full nine-year Tibetan monastic curriculum into English. In this approach, the cultivation of wisdom/understanding involves meditation in the phases of both contemplation and meditation. The understanding arisen from hearing is a necessary step in preparing you for the actual practice of analytical meditation, but is not analytical meditation itself. Based on the understanding developed through study, one then engages in analytical meditation on the teachings. There are three stages of a session of analytical meditation:

Stage 1: Preparation—Settling the mind in Calm Abiding (*śamatha*).

Stage 2: Contemplation—Engaging in the Analytical Meditation (Insight Meditation (*vipaśyanā*)) of alternating:

a) Analysis joined with meditation and...

b) Resting Meditation that rests in the experience of insight arisen from analysis.

Stage 3: Meditation—Abiding in Resting Meditation without analysis.

Of the three understandings, contemplation corresponds to Stage 2 and meditation corresponds to Stage 3. Calm abiding itself does not involve formal analysis, so Stage 1 is not actual analytical

¹⁰ Translation by D. Phillip Stanley from the Tibetan edition of D4090, vol. Khu, folio 8a.1-3. However, Vasubandhu prefers a somewhat different presentation to that of the Vaibhāṣikas: “(1) The understanding arisen from hearing is the certainty that has arisen from the valid cognition of the words of an authoritative person. (2) The understanding arisen from contemplation is the certainty that has arisen from definitive analysis by reasoning. (3) The understanding arisen from meditation is the certainty that has arisen from concentration.” Translation by D. Phillip Stanley from the Tibetan edition of D4090, vol. Khu, folio 8a.4-5.

meditation, but is an important preparation for the actual analysis. To have the proper insight meditation of analytical meditation, the analysis must be conjoined with calm abiding, which occurs in the understanding arisen from contemplation in Stage 2. Stage 3 is a union of calm abiding and the experiential result or impact of the analysis, so it too is a union of calm abiding and insight, but without the overt engagement in analysis. This mixing of conceptual analysis with meditation is viewed as deepening one's conceptual understanding, as well as one's non-conceptual meditative realization, which becomes imbued with the resonance of what one has realized through analysis. If there is time at the end of this presentation, we can do a brief session of analytical meditation.

Naturally, wisdom/understanding and meditation also interact with, and can be deepened by, a person's engagement in ethical conduct. For example, one might develop pride about one's meditation and understanding, and the pride could come to imbue one's meditation and efforts to develop wisdom. This attitude might well display itself in daily life and be exposed through one's conduct. Conduct can thus lead to insight into one's state of mind that was previously hidden to you, thus contributing to the purification of your meditation and understanding. In short, the implication here is again that the benefits of using meditation to help in non-Buddhist contexts will likely be increased if one can skillfully join such meditation with reflections on ethic and view, e.g., through reflecting on models for working with ethics and human psychology. The depth one can go in presenting elements of the three trainings would need to accord with the parameters of a given situation.

III. Presenting the Three Trainings in a Non-Normative Manner

How then are care-professionals rooted in the Buddhist tradition to present the three trainings in non-traditional contexts where it is skillful to use terminology and methods that are accessible and useful to those who do not necessarily identify as Buddhist, and who may well be running away from their "manure," denying it, trying unsuccessfully to throw it away as terrible? Given that people are often habitually engaged in self-deprecation, one response to this question is to broaden the range of meditative methods one uses, particularly forms of meditation that have an affective impact on participants, such as the loving kindness practice (Pāli: *metta*) from the Theravāda tradition, the compassion practice of sending-and-taking (Tib: "tonglen", *gtong len*) and the stages of the path (Tib: *lam rim*) contemplations from the Tibetan tradition, and guided meditations on the four immeasurables from a range of Buddhist traditions.

There is increased use of these methods of meditation in the mindfulness movement. As a result, there appears to be more willingness to acknowledge that Buddhist ethical principles are intrinsic to teaching such practices. One would expect that care professionals often use a non-normative teaching style in exploring the ethical principles implied/involved in such practices with non-Buddhist or marginally Buddhist participants. For example, care-professionals might pose questions to participants of whether each party in a difficult relationship have at least some responsibility for the difficulty, rather than viewing it as entirely the responsibility of the other person? Or more generally, does one have at least some responsibility for what happens to oneself? Is at least some of what happens to oneself a consequence of one's own past actions? Such questions are deeply ground in Buddhist ethics and worldview, but can be readily phrased

in language that is not specifically Buddhist and that invites participants to reflect on their experience without normative presuppositions.

However, one still hears expression of the attitude that they may be teaching Buddhist ethical principles when teaching these forms of affective meditation, "...but I still don't teach Buddhist doctrine." However, just as one cannot separate Buddhist ethics from loving kindness and compassion practices, one cannot separate Buddhist meditation and ethics from Buddhist view. All three are deeply intertwined. One can also say this for teaching simplified mindfulness. Are there not teaching elements of Buddhist view (and ethics) already implicitly present, however much they may not acknowledge it. Simply because they do not make it evident that they are drawing from the Buddhist tradition by avoiding foreign terms or English terms commonly used in Buddhism does not mean they are not teaching elements of Buddhist view. Moreover, they are likely communicating their knowledge of Buddhist teachings and experience with Buddhist meditation through non-verbal modeling, through their overall demeanor and the way in which they relate to participants' emotional difficulties and to the relational difficulties in groups. Some of the participants will learn and articulate to themselves what they see you doing, even if you have not verbally stated the view behind your approach. How much more beneficial could it be if you also explicitly articulated the view behind your actions, while still avoiding Buddhist jargon? The key point here is that care professionals are likely already teaching all three trainings, including ethics and view, in a non-normative way, at least to some degree.

To approach this from a different angle, why is it that care professionals, and also Buddhist teachers teaching to Westerners, often find it possible to teach Buddhist principles in a way that their audience does not feel they are being taught "religion"? Buddhist teachings and contemplative practices can often be experienced as intelligible and insightful descriptions of human experience that do not involve religious belief. Participants can make sense of what is being presented in light of their own experience and reflection, without experiencing it as belonging to a "religious" tradition. There are frequently parallels between Buddhism and psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, anthropology, social science, and so on. There are of course contexts and ways of teaching Buddhism that people would identify as "religious." However, as Western Buddhism matures, there is an increasing group of experienced Buddhist teachers and care professionals who move back and forth between secular and religious contexts, utilizing their experience and understanding of Buddhism, as well as of other disciplines, as appropriate. It is possible to present elements of Buddhism in both contexts with integrity and in a manner that is respectful to their different responsibilities in the different contexts.

Moreover, while there are clearly numerous parallels between Buddhism, psychology, and so forth, Buddhism has developed and refined methods for skillfully engaging all three trainings in a synergistic fashion over centuries. If modern care professionals feel that Buddhist mindfulness methods are beneficial for non-Buddhist clients, why would they presume that insights from Buddhist ethics and view would not also be beneficial for their clients, especially in combination with mindfulness? In short, it is proposed that 1) it is more skillful for care professionals who draw on the Buddhist tradition to consciously acknowledge to themselves that they are already drawing from, and teaching, elements of all three trainings, 2) that they could be more effective in applying Buddhism to care giving contexts if they consciously worked to integrate elements of all three trainings in their work, regardless of whether their clients are or are not aware of the

Buddhist elements, and 3) this can be done in a manner that is appropriate for the different contexts in which they work, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist.

A further implication of these considerations, is that care professionals would benefit from continuing engagement in all three trainings, both personally and professionally. It is proposed that this especially true of studying the view of Buddhism in order to strengthen one's wisdom/understanding. Many of the great masters of Buddhism were not only profound meditators, but great scholars as well. Clearly not everyone needs to be a highly trained scholar. Continuing to study in whatever way and at whatever level of detail you choose is going to help both yourself and those you serve.

The situation in the United States may be an extreme in this regard. Anti-intellectualism is deeply rooted there because of the dominant historical role that Protestant Christianity has played.¹¹ It has often been unconsciously presumed by American Buddhists that anti-intellectualism is an appropriate attitude to have towards Buddhism. This is exacerbated by a pervasive alienation from their high school and college education. By contrast the Buddhist view of the use of intellect is that, whatever the limitations and defects the intellect may have, it should be used to develop emotional insight, selflessness, compassion, humility, and so forth, not arrogance, aggression, egotism, and ambition. Trungpa Rinpoche expresses this point well:

Learning and practice are the essence of the Buddhist way. The mark of practice is a lessening of the kleshas, or neurotic thought-patterns...The mark of learning is gentleness. It is being tame and peaceful. So learning is not purely academic...You might think "I couldn't care less about scholarship. I just want to sit and make myself a good Buddhist." But that's not quite possible. You cannot become a real, good, enlightened person if you do not understand what your life is all about. With gentleness, what you study becomes part of your psychological geography...without having to push...

How to be in your life is meditation practice; how to understand your life is scholarship. That combination comes up in ordinary life as well. For instance, eating food is meditation practice, and talking about how to cook that food is scholarship. So those two factors work together. If you rely on sitting practice alone, quite possibly you could become just a stupid meditator. But if you study too much and don't meditate enough, you could become busy-stupid...So both sides are important, both the heart and the brain.¹²

One hears the view of anti-intellectualism expressed by some American Zen students. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for professors of the Ch'an tradition to ironically note that while the Ch'an tradition frequently rejects the value of conceptual study, it has the most extensive literature of all the Chinese traditions. While it is renowned for its emphasis on direct experience, Ch'an has a sophisticated literary tradition, and it is naïve to understand its verbal rejection of conceptual study in a simplistic manner. In summary, from a traditional Buddhist perspective,

¹¹ See, for instance, Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963), which won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction.

¹² Chögyam Trungpa, *The Path of Individual Liberation*, Vol. 1 of *The Profound Treasury of the Ocean of Dharma*, Judith L. Lief, ed. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013) 40-41.

whatever the variations in emphasis within the different traditions, there will be personal benefit in continuing to engage in all three trainings, which will, in turn, enhance your skills as a care professional.