

Mindful Attention to Everyday Social Categorization



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This article employs a mindful approach to social categorization, which often turns negative and leads to prejudice, discrimination, and hatred. The main focus is put on considering whether mindfulness can help resolve social categorization in our daily lives. Buddhist mindfulness is examined as a means against human biases that influence us to categorize people socially. Through mindfulness, our views and interactions with others can be more open and caring. The article employs a mindful methodology that focuses on openness and consideration of the research and its subjects and contributes to the current state of research by creating a greater awareness of the connection between mindfulness and social categorization in our everyday lives.

This paper aims to consider whether mindful attention can help resolve social categorization in our everyday lives. Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are the following:

1. Identify traditional and contemporary mindfulness aspects associated with our everyday social interactions.
2. Analyze how mindful attention is connected to our social interactions and categorizations.
3. Examine the importance of the everyday and ordinary in our daily lives and social interactions.
4. Formulate a connection between mindful attention and our everyday social categorizations.

The methodology employed in this research is based on mindfulness. Approaches with mindful components are valuable here because the research focuses on mindfulness in a new context. Awareness, open viewpoints, and meditation practice can help us see our research more clearly from different perspectives. This approach is described by Sikh and Spence (2016, 7) as a mindfulness hermeneutic and was employed in this research to help look at mindfulness in new ways. A mindful approach also is one where mindfulness is more than thought, which makes sense because, as humans, we live by more than just thinking. We also interact with our world and others through feeling and compassion. Bentz and Shapiro (1998, 64) call this methodology a *mindful inquiry* that approaches our research with “gentleness and care.” Through this mindful inquiry, we approach research subjects through caring, which can be vital when our subjects are the objects of prejudice and discrimination.

2 Beginning with Mindfulness

In his influential book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryū Suzuki (2020, 130–131) depicts the initial steps on a path toward awareness. This path may be inconspicuous, but it could be crucial to our human growth. It is a path of observing ourselves and our world with an open mind:

You are quite free from material things, and you begin Zen practice with a very pure mind, a beginner's mind. You can understand Buddha's teaching exactly as he meant it. But we must not be attached to America, or Buddhism, or even to our practice. We must have beginner's mind, free from possessing anything, a mind that knows everything is in flowing change.

In our daily lives, not one of us is a beginner. That is, we have knowledge and wisdom of ourselves and others through thoughts, feelings, and experiences that are rich and deep. However, as Suzuki mentions, we should set aside our faded constructions so we may see in new ways.

3 Mindfulness in the Buddhist Tradition

Mindfulness has been a vital part of the Buddhist tradition since it began more than twenty-five centuries ago (Bodhi 2011, 20; Hanh 2009, 26–27; Thera 2014, xiv). From the Buddha's words in the Mahā-Satipahāna-Sutta, we see how mindfulness, or Right Mindfulness, is a component of the Noble Eightfold Path. The path that takes us away from suffering (Thera 2014, 140):

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering?

It is that Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

After questioning the monks about Right Action and other aspects of the path, the Buddha asks (Thera 2014, 141):

And what is Right Mindfulness? Herein a monk dwells practicing body-contemplation on the body – practicing feeling-contemplation on feelings – practicing mind-contemplation on the mind – practicing mind-object-contemplation on mind-objects, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world: this is Right Mindfulness.

Ancient Buddhist mindfulness was closely connected to the Buddha's teachings of the eightfold path, practices for living in a right way (Gethin 2011, 268). Although there are eight parts to that path, with mindfulness being the seventh, the Buddha considered mindfulness to be at the core of everything in his doctrine (Hanh 2009, 115; Thera 2014, xiii). The details of mindfulness are described in the Buddha's Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. This sutra describes four methods of mindfulness which are focuses on our body, our feelings, our state of mind which is our mental condition at the moment, and the objects of our mind which are our mental contents at the moment (Hanh 2009, 26–27; Thera 2014, 14–15).

Mindfulness may seem like it relates to memory. For example, early Buddhism contained references to memory in mindfulness. However, that type of memory was more than a recollection of past events. Instead, it referred to keeping things in mind, and being open to receiving information about ourselves and the world around us (Anālayo 2020b, 323–324). In this way, mindfulness helps move us toward an awakening. It is an awakening that is both internal and external, and suggests a shift toward an awareness of the experience of others (Anālayo 2020b, 324). Mindfulness is also a focus on something. It is a purposeful and conscious attention to a particular thing (Hanh 2009, 5). For example, a focus of our mindfulness could be the Buddha’s teachings (Van Schaik 2016, 196), or how we interact with people and categorize them.

When the Buddha talks about Right Mindfulness the word “right” describes a movement away from false influences in our life and a move toward doing right things in the right way (Thera 2014, 11). In early Buddhist teachings, “right” refers to an awakening and openness in our interactions with our world. In those teachings, mindfulness is not a set of ethics, but instead works together with our ethics since being ethical cleanses our inner selves and being mindful strengthens our ethics (Anālayo 2021, 91–93). In this way our mindfulness helps in our social interactions with others.

Mindfulness in the ancient Buddhist texts is often connected to the term clear comprehension. Where mindfulness is paying close attention to something, clear comprehension is acting upon it (Thera 2014, 14–15). Clear comprehension also enables us to concentrate our activity on purposeful words and actions (Thera 2014, 34–40). More importantly, in the context of social categorization in this article, clear comprehension guides us toward selfless action in the aid of those who are suffering (Thera 2014, 50).

4 Mindfulness Today

Today, according to Cassaniti (2018, 235), mindfulness in the United States and Asian Buddhist areas is practiced similarly. That is, both focus on being attentive to our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings or, in other words, being attentive to the present moment. Both also employ mindfulness to bring greater calm to ourselves and develop a greater awareness of others. However, Asian Buddhist mindfulness tends to retain the Buddhist tradition, while mindfulness in the United States focuses more on an awareness of the self, others, and the encompassing environment. In its contemporary usage, mindfulness is sometimes described as an activity of bare

attention. Interestingly, this bare attention is only one way to practice mindfulness. Today we use it as a learning tool for those beginning a mindful practice.

In this article, we will employ the simpler version of mindfulness as attention. Accordingly, as a short definition for the remainder of this article, mindfulness is paying attention to ourselves, others, and the world around us. How we observe with our mindfulness is important because it should occur without judging ourselves or others (Verhaeghen 2020, 306).

An important aspect of mindfulness is that it is practiced in the present moment. When we observe ourselves and others through mindfulness, we refrain from analyzing past feelings and actions and forgo the fantasies of future possibilities. Instead, in mindfulness, we remain in the present. Being in the present moment can reduce the suffering in our daily lives. Epstein (2019, 31) describes how connecting to the present is a spiritual need in Judaism. In this sense, suffering arises when we move away from the present and lean toward worries of the past and anxieties of the future. The Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh (1992, 27) suggests that we should be aware of the present moment, even in our ordinary activities:

Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end – that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.

Through mindfulness, our everyday lives become more than carrying out daily routines. With the practice of mindfulness, the moments in our lives become more interesting and creative (Hahn 1992, 40).

5 Mindfulness is Action

We may presume that mindfulness is only about contemplation. However, action is an essential part of mindfulness. As Hanh (2020, 115–116) suggests, “*Buddhism must be engaged. What is the use of practicing meditation if it does not have anything to do with our daily lives?*” Several years ago, I trained to become a meditation instructor and realized the classes subtly led toward action. In the ancient *samatha* tradition (Batchelor 2011, 163–164; Wallace 2007, 135–137), we were taught to meditate with our eyes open. Interestingly, this method connected our meditation to the world around us. It prepared us to remain calm during difficult meetings and long waiting lines. It gradually incorporated our meditation into the activities of our everyday lives.

Action arises through various avenues in the landscape of our communities and our interactions with others. However, action also applies to ourselves and an awareness within ourselves. Accordingly, mindfulness enables us to act appropriately with wisdom and compassion. As a result of our mindful actions, our social ecosystem can be more enriching and humane for everyone (Julian 2021, 211).

In our hectic lives, we quickly forget that our interaction with the world begins within us. Paying attention to ourselves can help us understand ourselves. It allows us to observe our thoughts and actions. Accordingly, mindful attention enables spaces for our observance and meta-cognitive processes (Zarbock *et al.* 2014, 14). It helps us regulate our attention and emotions such that practitioners report increased positive moods while reducing anxiety and depression (Walter and Materi-Shushan 2022, 102). Mindful attention also helps us with false narratives we play in our heads about ourselves and others. It allows us to approach our narratives compassionately to change those negative stories (Zarbock *et al.* 2014, 27–28).

Mindfulness in action aids our personal growth. According to Hanh (2020, 57–59), mindfulness in our everyday lives helps us understand ourselves and the world around us. In addition, studies suggest mindfulness helps us grow and gain wisdom about our inner selves. Mindfulness also promotes fairness and caring for others (Verhaeghen 2020, 331–332). In my own experience, these actions recall a saying we often shared during our meditation training: we do not live to improve our meditation; instead, we meditate to improve our lives.

Mindfulness provides action avenues for resolving social problems. Van Doesum *et al.* (2013, 87) describe a social mindfulness that focuses on the needs of others. The intent is to give people options in their decision-making. Accommodating others in this way enables them to make their own decisions in their daily lives. Social mindfulness's outcome can be a personal and mutual well-being (Van Doesum *et al.* 2013, 101).

Other avenues of action can also be taken. For example, research has shown that mindful meditation and Christian contemplation can alleviate those discriminated against and reduce the harm from those who discriminate (Polinska 2018, 336). In another example, Anālayo (2020a, 2295) suggests that mindfulness can lower our biases of superiority in racial contexts. Additionally, according to Miller and Verhaeghen (2022, 10), mindfulness and compassion increase our recognition of humanity and ethnic sensitivity.

We do not live alone, nor would we want to except for occasional days of respite. We live in a family, a community, and a world of people. Often, these people are very different from us: they look different, wear different clothing, and think differently. These differences result in social categorizations that can turn negative and lead to prejudice, discrimination, and eventually hatred. Hahn suggests that mindfulness can help us resolve these social problems. Accordingly, mindful people are aware of suffering and work toward the well-being of others (Hanh 2020, 101–103).

6 The Problems of Social Categorization

Categorization is a cognitive process we use throughout the day. Everywhere we go, we categorize the objects we see and the actions we perform. For example, we pick up a hairbrush and drive a car to the store. In just that single sentence, several categories of objects and events exist. We also categorize the woman next door, the man who lives down the street, and the person we just walked past on the sidewalk. We do it all the time without even thinking. In other words, it is difficult, if not impossible, to stop categorizing (Brown 2010, 36).

In this article, categorization is not about the objects and events in our daily lives. Instead, it is about the categorization of people. Here, we classify people like biologists who tabulate woodland plants or garden beetles. We look at the common attributes of people and then place them into groups with others who have similar traits. For example, we may classify people in our community by their profession, gender, or hair color. We may do the same to those we see while driving down the street or walking into a store.

In these social categorizations, we place people with attributes like our own into the same groups we belong to, called ingroups. Similarly, we place those who do not share our attributes into outgroups (Lieberman, Woodward, and Kinzler 2017, 556). Not all social categorizations are harmful, of course. They can be valuable when we need to find a plumber, a nurse, or a doctor. However, categorizing people is not always beneficial. When we categorize people into groups, the results can lead to prejudice. Brown describes the close everyday connection between social categorization and prejudice. “*The idea that social categorization is a necessary precursor of prejudice is crucial because it emphasizes prejudice’s ordinary or common-place nature*” (Brown 2010, 36). Perhaps the everydayness of social categorization, as Brown indicates, is

most disturbing because it suggests that social categorization is infused into our daily lives.

Research and studies show that mindfulness may help resolve the problems of social categorization. According to Anālayo (2020a, 2295), mindfulness enables us to monitor our thoughts, feelings, and actions continuously. Consequently, we can employ mindfulness to check our racial biases and tendency toward superiority. The expectation is a shift from harming others to a move toward responsible actions of equality in our everyday lives. Studies show that mindfulness enables greater optimism and reduces negative biases, which may help practitioners interact with others (Kiken and Shook 2011, 429–430). According to research, mindfulness enables those in prejudiced outgroups to be viewed more equally. In this manner, mindfulness can bring people together more effectively than equality efforts that originate through cultures or institutions (Lueke and Gibson 2016, 41). Additionally, Runco (2020, 49) suggests that mindfulness could help resolve issues of social categorization. He uses the term mindlessness to describe our cognition when it is categorizing. Overall, the associations of mindfulness described above indicate that novel avenues of resolving social categorization are possible in our everyday lives.

7 The Importance of Everydayness

Mindfulness occurs in our everyday lives in several ways. First, it enables us to live in the here and now. In this way, we can enjoy each moment even if we only sit, walk, or eat (Sadri 2020, 20). This aspect of everydayness suggests that mindfulness can be a component of our interactions with others in every moment. Also, everyday mindfulness is not only about being attentive each day. Instead, it is also about being attentive to the mundane aspects of our day-to-day lives (Thompson and Waltz 2007, 1876). This everydayness suggests that mindfulness can be part of our interactions with others, even if those interactions seem small and unimportant. Additionally, the nonjudgmental character of mindfulness enables us to be aware of ourselves and others throughout the day with more openness and inclusion (Senker, Fries, and Grund 2022, 2795).

The everyday is more than cooking meals and driving to the grocery store. Those activities are important in our everyday lives. However, the connection between the everyday and our sacred traditions is essential. The sacred provides meaning and understanding to our daily activities (Byrne 1991, 25). Additionally, sacred traditions enable space and time to con-

template the goodness that can exist in our daily activities (Volf 2017, 60–61).

The connection between the everyday and our human existence is also essential. The everyday is infused into our human existence. Everything we do occurs in the everyday. As Pink (2012, 143) describes it, the everyday “*is at the centre of human existence, the essence of who we are and our location in the world.*” Even objects in our daily lives have meaning and an aesthetic beyond what we discern from a glance. Spending a moment considering an object: how it was made, where it came from, and who made it helps us make sense of things in our world and the environment we live in (Saito 2013, 243–244).

We often take the everyday for granted and do not recognize it is where we work, play, and rest. Yet, it is also where we and others build our homes, families, and communities. Henri Lefebvre (2014, 157) focuses on the everyday in his book *the Critique of Everyday Life*:

Thus bit by bit there is a growing conviction that in one sense lavish institutions and grandiose ideas were façades – theatrical costumes. On the almost stagnant waters of everyday life there have been mirages, phosphorescent ripples. These illusions were not without results, since to achieve results was their very raison d’être. And yet, where is genuine reality to be found? Where do the genuine changes take place? In the unmysterious depths of everyday life!

In Lefebvre’s words, the phrases “genuine changes” and “unmysterious depths” stand out as pointed depictions of the everyday. The phrases delineate where real change occurs while succinctly describing the richness of the ordinary in our lives. Using mindfulness in the milieu of the everyday makes sense in the context of resolving social categorization. The everyday is where real change exists, as Lefebvre indicated, and where the challenges of social categorization transpire.

8 A Return to the Ordinary

Not long-ago people sat together at a kitchen table and talked while playing cards for hours. Those occasions seem ordinary today, and they probably did then too. However, people cherished those times as real and significant moments in their daily lives. Today, we have moved away from appreciating the ordinary moments in our lives. Perhaps the barrage of internet information has diminished our ability to pay attention to the ordinary real world around us (Hinson

2013, 270). However, ordinariness in our everyday lives remains important and still has meaning. An example is in our self-reflection. Many of us self-reflect to gauge how we feel or what we think. Interestingly, mindfulness and ordinariness are components of that reflection. Mindfulness lets us consider our thoughts and feelings, while ordinariness connects us to everyday tasks (Epstein 1999, 883; Raab 2014, 101). It is these ordinary tasks where our real lives occur and bring credence to our reflections.

Intriguingly, the ordinary can be a pathway for exploring new aspects of our everyday lives and social interactions. According to Olendzki (2009, 43), the content of our attention is not necessarily the important part of mindfulness. In other words, how we pay attention is crucial. Pausing and noticing our breath or any ordinary activity should occur with careful attention. With this careful attention, we can better investigate the ebb and flow of the ordinary experience that runs through our daily lives. In further exploring the ordinary, Migid (2020, 377) considers mindfulness as an ordinary state of mind. In this sense, it is not just the moments of our day where ordinariness matters. There is also an ordinariness of our mind-state. Rather than an embellishment of extraordinary frames of consciousness or compassion, Migid describes mindfulness as an ordinary cognitive state that is with us generally throughout the day.

After the depictions above, we may feel that the ordinary remains dreary and uninteresting. Of course, such a feeling makes sense – sitting on a bus or parking a car are particularly tedious tasks. However, as Moran (2005, 169) suggests, to change our everyday lives, we must view these ordinary activities as serious and real spaces of living.

9 Attention to Everyday Social Categorization

This article began with a discussion of mindfulness, how it enables us to pay attention to the present moment, and how we can use mindfulness to resolve personal and social challenges. It then described how mindfulness could be employed to battle social categorization, how mindfulness connects to the everyday and the significance of the everyday and ordinary aspects of our daily lives. Next, we discuss paying attention to our everyday social categorizations.

Mindful attention is important because this attention, in our everyday and ordinary lives, can be employed to counter social categorization in several ways. For example, in our shift to resolve social categorization, attention is not simply

a short glance and then a turn elsewhere. Instead, attention is a complete focus from the person onto the thing being considered (Deroche 2021, 874), which is our social interaction. Also, fusing attention and the present enables mindfulness to function from moment to moment (Deroche 2021, 876). In the context of social categorization, this attention enables us to be aware of all our moments of social interaction throughout the day.

Additionally, mindfulness means paying attention in a way that is purposeful and without judgment (Gethin 2011, 269). This nonjudgmental mode of attention is valuable in being open and unbiased in our social interactions. Furthermore, attention is also action as a continual structuring of awareness and experience (Ganeri 2017, 12). This ongoing structuring in the context of social categorization can be valuable in our everyday lives. It enables our awareness and experience to inform one another in a shifting framework of understanding ourselves and our interactions with others. Finally, attention to our subtle nuances, even in a cafe, enables us to see the rhythms of social interactions. From this mindful view, we can better understand the effect of our social interactions on others in our everyday lives (Back 2015, 821). As Thich Nhat Hanh (2020, 60) emphasizes, each of our everyday activities is significant:

Every action, every thought has an effect. Even if I just clap my hands, the effect is everywhere, even in faraway galaxies. Every sitting, every walking, every smile will have an effect on your own daily life, and the life of other people also, and practice must be based on that.

The more mindfully attentive we are of our everyday actions, the more we may notice how we categorize others. Nowhere is this mindful attention more vital than where challenged individuals, minority families, and displaced communities struggle to survive and grow.

10 Conclusion

This article began with a discussion of traditional Buddhist mindfulness, how it includes aspects of the Buddhist doctrine, how mindfulness is at the heart of the tradition, and how it can be a means against human biases that influence us to categorize people socially. It showed that our current Western view of mindfulness is similar to the traditional view though it does not include aspects of the Buddhist doctrine. Next, the article described how our social interactions could benefit from traditional and contemporary mindfulness. It then discussed how action is essential to mindfulness and

our social interactions. Challenges associated with social categorization were examined. How mindfulness can alleviate some of those challenges was discussed. The article then showed how everydayness and ordinariness are valuable aspects of mindfulness. It also showed how social categorization occurs in our everyday and ordinary lives. Finally, it showed that mindful attention to everyday social categorization could help us be more aware of our social categorization of others.

Based on these findings, mindfulness and our associated mindful actions can benefit how we look at our social categorization of others. In addition, being more aware of how we interact with others may reduce our cognitive tendency to place people into groups that increase our differences. Hopefully, this article shows that a path is possible toward a greater awareness of our social categorization of others and exposes the actions needed to resolve those categorizations.

Two areas for further investigation come to mind here. First is a deeper analysis of our internal cognitive processes of mindfulness and social categorization. This analysis could reveal mechanisms that are shared and that accommodate each other. In this manner, mindfulness and categorization could inform one another in ways we have not yet considered. Another investigation could occur in the realm of the everyday. Everydayness is vital to our humanity and sacred connections, yet we must pay more attention to it. A close examination could identify everyday aspects associated with social categorization and uncover connections we had not previously considered.

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