

The Concept of *smṛti* in the *Yogasūtra*: Memory or Mindfulness?

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Abstract

One of the key concepts in Buddhist meditation is mindfulness which has recently been introduced into new environments, including contemporary yoga. This paper identifies some of the parameters involved in the rather seamless integration of Buddhist mindfulness and yoga and explores whether this synthesis is an ancient one, already found in the oldest recorded text on yoga, the *Yogasūtra*, by investigating if the word *smṛti*, usually translated as “memory,” can refer to mindfulness. This would imply that mindfulness may have been a component of ancient yogic practices, although perhaps lost at some stage in the transmission only to be reintroduced recently by the syncretistic new trends in the globalised spiritual movements.

Keywords: *Yogasūtra*, Patañjali, modern yoga, mindfulness, modern Buddhism

Izveček

Eden od osnovnih konceptov budistične meditacije je pozornost ali čuječnost. V zadnjih desetletjih se je praksa meditacijske pozornosti razširila na številna nova področja, med drugim tudi v sodobne jogijske prakse. Prispevek poskuša identificirati nekaj glavnih parametrov, ki pogojujejo integracijo budistične meditacije in joge in raziskuje, ali je koncept pozornosti morda bil prisoten že v najstarejšem poznanem besedilu o jogi, v *Yogasūtri*. V tem besedilu se večkrat pojavi koncept *smṛti*, ki je ponavadi preveden kot »spomin«. Prispevek predlaga novo intepretacijo tega koncepta in ga prevaja kot »meditacijska pozornost«. Nova interpretacija odpira vprašanje, ali je praksa pozornosti bila prisotna že v starodavnih jogijskih praksah, a se je pri prenosu jogijskih tradicij izgubila in se šele danes ponovno pojavila v jogi kot odsev sinkretističnih duhovnih gibanj 21. stoletja.

Ključne besede: *Yogasūtra*, Patañjali, sodobna yoga, pozornost, sodobni budizem

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1 Introduction

Yoga and Buddhism, two closely related ancient Indian religious traditions, seem to be undergoing a new integration in the contemporary world. In the last decade, mindfulness has been increasingly introduced as a component of yogic practices, especially in the “Western” world (e.g. Boccio 2004).¹ The most obvious reason for this new development seems to be the frequent involvement of many contemporary teachers and practitioners of yoga in Buddhist meditation—most of them would actively practice or at least have some experience of mindfulness and consequently, they aim to integrate various aspects of the two traditions.² Before new meanings and functions of mindfulness in modern Yoga and modern Buddhism³ are explored, it is important to situate the concept of mindfulness in the historical context, i.e. to briefly outline the origins and the semantic history of this important meditation tool.

2 The Roots of Mindfulness

Most traditional schools of Buddhism view mindfulness (Pāli *sati*, Sanskrit *smṛti*) as one of the key elements of Buddhist meditation. Interpretations of mindfulness that have evolved in modern Buddhism very frequently refer back to Theravāda sources, hence this overview of the roots of mindfulness draws from the Theravāda Buddhist canon and consequently, the technical terms for mindfulness and the related concepts are given (in brackets) in Pāli. In the earliest textual records the word mindfulness (*sati*) seems to appear in two broader senses: (1) occasionally, it refers to “memory, recollection” or, more precisely, to a mental factor which facilitates memory rather than referring to memory itself (Anālayo 2006, 46); (2) frequently, the term refers to mindfulness as awareness of the present moment (i.e. observation of mental and physical processes from moment to moment) which the Canonical texts describe mainly through attributes and

¹ The term “Western” in inverted commas is used here, with some hesitation, to refer to the contemporary societies of MEDC (more economically developed countries) such as North America, Europe, Australia.

² Contemporary yogic schools of India seem to follow their traditional paths more consistently and hence do not incorporate innovations easily, at least not as fast as yogic schools in the “West.”

³ Here I use the term “modern yoga” as defined by De Michelis (2004, 1–6), referring to yogic practices that evolved over the last 150 years through interaction between India and the “West.” Similarly, I use the term “modern Buddhism” to encompass a wide range of Buddhist beliefs and practices that developed over the last hundred years and have become in the last few decades global phenomena, often included under the umbrella term “Buddhism.”

functions such as: presence, wakefulness, strong cognition, boundlessness etc.⁴ Although the interrelation between the two meanings of *sati* has been discussed by several scholars (e.g. Gethin 2011), many aspects of the overlaps and differences between the two interpretations need further investigation which, however, lies outside the scope of this article.

Early Buddhist texts distinguish several concepts that are closely related to mindfulness and yet to be distinguished from it. An important concept is attention or awareness (*manasikāra*): it is, according to the *Abhidhamma*, a mental factor (*cetasika*) which occurs with every mind moment and functions as the bare cognition of an object before it is identified and conceptualized (see e.g. Bodhi, 81). When attention is accompanied by understanding of what is wholesome or not it is called wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*); it facilitates the development of mindfulness and wisdom—the two factors that are indispensable on the path to final spiritual liberation (Anālayo 2006, 58). All Buddhist texts position mindfulness as an integral part of the Buddhist path; mindfulness is one of the five faculties and powers; the first of the seven factors of enlightenment and one of the components of the noble eightfold path. Mindfulness as a component of the noble eightfold path is called right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), defined in the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* as mindfulness (*sati*) which is accompanied by freedom from desire and aversion (*vineyya abhijjhādomanassa*), clear comprehension (*sampajāna*) and diligence (*ātāpī*) (Anālayo 2006, 49). Right mindfulness is strongly associated with and linked to the ethical and soteriological aspects of the Buddhist doctrine: it provides an understanding as to whether mental states are wholesome or not; protects the mind from reacting with desire and aversion; and, together with clear comprehension, provides the foundation for wisdom and consequently, is an indispensable tool and constituent on the path to *nibbāna*.

The practice of mindfulness as the path to liberation is discussed in several canonical and post-canonical texts; e.g., many discourses in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Samyutta Nikāya*, as well as in Chinese *Āgamas* and in several Sanskrit Buddhist texts. One of the prominent canonical texts on meditation is the

⁴ E.g. the *Visuddhimagga* (XIV, 141), an important source of meditation methods for modern Buddhism, defines mindfulness: “By its means they remember (*saranti*), or it itself remembers, or it is just mere remembering (*saraṇa*) thus it is mindfulness (*sati*). It has the characteristic of not wobbling. Its function is not to forget. It is manifested as guarding, or it is manifested as the state of confronting an objective field. Its proximate cause is strong perception, or its proximate cause is the Foundations of Mindfulness, concerned with the body and so on (see *Majjhima Nikāya Sutta* 10). It should be regarded, however, as like a pillar because it is firmly founded, or as like a door-keeper because it guards the eye-door, and so on” (Buddhaghosa 1956, 524).

Satipaṭṭhānasutta (“Discourse on the establishment of mindfulness”)⁵ which has received the most elevated position as the ur-text on mindfulness in modern Buddhism (e.g. Ñāṇaponika 1962, 11). This veneration of the text started “in the colonial era as the schools of Buddhism attempted to respond to the challenges of the modern age” (Sujato 2005, 113), particularly in Burma, emphasizing the rational aspects of meditation, aiming to authenticate and legitimize new methods of meditation through the canonical texts and the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* in particular. The *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* discusses four areas of contemplation: mindfulness of the body (*kāyā*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*) and mental objects (*dhamma*), however, according to several canonical texts (e.g. *Samyutta Nikāya* V 182) any single *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation can lead to liberation which may be why several modern meditation teachers (e.g. U Ba Khin) have recommended a single area of mindfulness as the path to enlightenment.

3 New Interpretations of Mindfulness

Although the concept of mindfulness has been known in the “West” since the European discovery of Buddhism in the nineteenth century, it is only in the last few decades that the practice of mindfulness has spread globally. Even a brief look at various book lists, journals and magazines on meditation, numerous publications and websites on psychotherapy and related areas, indicates that mindfulness is not only a major component of Buddhist meditation, but has been rapidly entering new environments. It is frequently applied in various forms of psychotherapy such as therapy for depression, anxiety disorders, pain management, working with children, relationship counselling, and has also been introduced into the work place and even in the corporate world, with courses such as mindful leadership, to name just a few. In these new milieux the meaning and function of mindfulness has been changing significantly.

In most Buddhist traditions, since the early beginnings, the ethical and soteriological functions of right mindfulness have been in the forefront. As mentioned earlier, Buddhism distinguishes awareness/attention, mindfulness and right mindfulness; however, these aspects have been modified or given new interpretations in modern Buddhism as well as in new secular contexts. The

⁵ Two versions of this *sutta* are found in the Theravāda Canon, a shorter one in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (M I 55–3), and a longer one in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (D II 305–15; this version gives a longer explanation of the four noble truths).

characteristic of mindfulness that is most emphasized by modern meditation teachers is bare awareness, with its non-interfering, uninvolved quality (sometimes it is called “choiceless awareness.” the term introduced by J. Krishnamurti). New interpretations of mindfulness focus particularly on one aspect of mindfulness (*sati*), i.e., attention to and awareness of the present moment, often adding that it is to be practiced in a non-judging way.⁶ Although modern Buddhist meditation teachings have retained, at least to some extent, the ethical and soteriological aspects of the practice of mindfulness, there is an increasing emphasis on its psychotherapeutic roles; e.g. “insight” is often interpreted in a new way, with more emphasis on understanding of or “insight” into the psychological content or past conditionings of an individual which may surface during the meditation practice in contrast to the traditional Buddhist “insight” which refers to an understanding of the three characteristics of existence (i.e. suffering, impermanence, and non-self) and aims at their complete eradication. Hence the popular definition of mindfulness often quoted in psychotherapeutic contexts presents mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally” (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145). Numerous studies indicate that mindfulness is helpful for a wide spectrum of problems and disorders independently from the Buddhist religious system and these studies view it as a tool for improving well-being; e.g. Baer (2006, 10) states that mindfulness leads to “the ability to make adaptive decisions about handling difficult and problematic situations as they arise, as well as increased enjoyment of pleasant moments”—stating aims significantly different from the Buddhist perspective which seeks freedom from desires, and from attachment to pleasure. Typically mindfulness-based therapies often combine awareness of the body and breath and sometimes include postural yoga (Baer 2006, 3–26), which aims at a kind of integration of yoga and mindfulness. This synthesis of the elements from the two traditions has not been occurring only in psychotherapeutic contexts but, especially in the last decade, many Buddhist meditation retreats include yogic practices and in turn, contemporary schools of yoga increasingly introduce mindfulness.

⁶ The attribute “non-judging” does not stem from Buddhist traditions; it was coined, as far as I am aware, by Kornfield (e.g. 2012, 2).

4 Yoga and Mindfulness: New Developments

In Sanskrit, the term yoga is polyvalent, covering a very wide semantic field: in a broader sense it signifies any spiritual path or practice within Indian religious traditions; in a narrower sense it refers to classical yoga, based on the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali and its commentaries. In modern English the term yoga is most commonly associated with various yogic practices focusing on postures, based on *haṭhayoga*; hence De Michelis introduces a new term for this practice, i.e. “Postural Yoga,” or “Neo-Haṭhayoga” (2004, 8). Similarly as modern Buddhism situates the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* to be the root text for the practice of mindfulness; modern yoga views the *Yogasūtra* to be its ur-text. The *Yogasūtra* that we know today is attributed to Patañjali, traditionally placed in the second century B.C.E. or, by modern scholarship, into approximately the second century C.E. In India the text is frequently invoked as a legitimate authority for practitioners of yoga which is largely based on postural yoga, although the text itself does not talk about postures and gives no evidence for *āsana* practice. Patañjali has even become a focus of devotion and the ritual recitation of this *sūtra* has elevated the text by treating it almost in a similar manner as Vedic texts (Singleton 2008, 91–92).

Since the 1990s, the proliferation of mindfulness-focused activities has also been reflected in modern yoga where it has been introduced as a therapeutic as well as a spiritual tool. The merging of the two traditions raises several questions: why has mindfulness been integrated into modern yoga rather seamlessly; what is the meaning and function of mindfulness in modern yoga; why is mindfulness most frequently introduced in those branches of modern yoga that focus on *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* such as Iyengar yoga; why is there a need to integrate mindfulness into modern yoga in the first place—what function does mindfulness supplement that yoga is perceived not to provide?

The two most widespread modern approaches to mindfulness are those popularized by Goenka (based on U Ba Khin’s method) and by Mahasi Sayadaw; both methods focus, at least initially, on mindfulness of the body and breath. In modern postural yoga, particularly in Iyengar yoga which is arguably the most widespread yoga today, the main focus of practice is the body (the practice of *āsanas*), with a secondary focus on breath (*prāṇāyāma*).⁷ In the last decade,

⁷ Although Iyengar frequently uses in his classes the term awareness in relation to *āsanas*, his usage of this term might have been introduced partly through his encounters with J. Krishnamurti who used the term “choiceless awareness” as one of the key concepts in meditation. Iyengar does not talk about mindfulness in a Buddhist sense.

“Western” practitioners of yoga have introduced mindfulness into yogic vocabulary, usually as a synonym for awareness of the posture, and sometimes also of sensations, feelings and mental states that arise when one is in a yogic posture. Although Buddhist and Yogic traditions have regarded themselves throughout their histories as spiritual paths, each providing complete practical and soteriological frameworks that would not require the introduction of additional practices, the synthesis of yoga and Buddhism, initiated in the “West,” has been very slowly transferred also into more traditional religious environments of Asia. Mindfulness in yoga is usually understood as awareness/attention which supports practitioners to be in the present moment, to improve their focus on bodily postures and the breath (e.g. Boccio 2004). The prevalent newly interpreted function of mindfulness as a therapeutic tool is increasingly being incorporated into modern yoga which has itself become in the last two decades largely secularised and medicalised, viewed as a “healing” practice to relieve stress, instrumental in building up “health and fitness” (De Michelis 2008, 24–26). Furthermore, mindful yoga has become commodified in the global consumer society where a proliferation of new types, styles and methods has been introduced and marketed in the yoga industry (Singleton and Byrne 2008, 1–2). However, on the other hand, it seems that mindfulness may provide for modern yoga a new focus, especially to the practice of *āsanas*, largely perceived as physical activity, often aiming to achieve greater fitness and flexibility; and thus viewed as lacking the spiritual or soteriological dimensions which are still present, though at the background, in Buddhist meditation.

The rather seamless integration of the two traditions may have been facilitated by a strong compatibility between the primary focus on *āsanas* and *prāṇāyama* in modern yoga and the primary focus on mindfulness of the body and breath in modern Buddhist meditation. In a larger historical context, the easy synthesis has been facilitated by several syncretistic movements starting in the late 19th century with the new developments such as the Theosophical Society and the Neo-vedānta in India, and later on, the emergence of the New Age movements in the 1970s, all of these encompass a great variety of spiritual traditions based on the idea of the “oneness” of all religions.⁸ The belief that all traditions lead to the same goal, that spiritual liberation or enlightenment is the same experience in all religions provides an environment in which it is very easy to transpose a method from

⁸ A thorough exploration of New Age religions and Neo-Vedānta as influential components in modern yoga is the main component of De Michelis’s book on modern yoga (2004).

another tradition. Thus, on the one hand, mindfulness has emerged in modern yoga as a therapeutic tool and on the other hand, it provides a spiritual background to secularized postural yoga. Its ethical component is usually not emphasized, and the traditional aim, spiritual liberation, is not a fully articulated goal but remains a rather distant and elusive possibility.

5 Mindfulness in Classical Yoga?

The relatively new integration of the two traditions prompts an enquiry into the question as to whether the synthesis of mindfulness and yoga is a new phenomenon or perhaps an ancient one, found already in old Indian texts on yoga, and whether indications of practise of mindfulness may be surmised already in the oldest recorded text on yoga, the *Yogasūtra*, the ur-text of modern yogic traditions. The *Yogasūtra*, attributed by the tradition to Patañjali, is a collection of 195 very brief aphorisms, usually situated in the second century C.E., though probably founded on a significantly older tradition, though there is no clear evidence of its pre-Buddhist origins. The text has received several traditional commentaries, the most important among them include: the *Yogabhāṣya* (“Exposition on Yoga”), the oldest commentary by Vyāsa, probably from the fifth century C.E.; the *Tattvavaiśārādī* (“Clarity of Truth”) by Vācaspatimiśra from the ninth century C. E.; and the subcommentary *Rājamārtaṇḍa* (“Royal Sun”) by Bhoja from the eleventh century.⁹

In ancient Indian religions, the technical terminology used is specific to a particular tradition and hence, texts usually introduce and define their own meta-language. Such is also the case in the *Yogasūtra* where many, but not all, technical terms are defined in the text itself.¹⁰ Modern interpreters often rely, in their translations of these terms, on later commentaries on the *Yogasūtra* such as Vyāsa’s and Vacaspatimiśra’s or sometimes draw from other Indian religious traditions; modern Indian translators frequently draw from Vedānta and modern theistic movements. Consequently, when reading translations of, and

⁹ Among later commentaries the following can be listed: the *Vivarana* (“Exposition”) by Śaṅkara, somewhere between the ninth and the fifteenth century; the *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* by Mādhava in the fourteenth century; the *Maṇi-prabhā* by Rāmānanda Yati in the sixteenth century; the *Laghvī* and the *Brhati* by Nāgojī Bhaṭṭa and the *Yoga-vārttika* and the *Yoga-sāra-saṃgraha* by Vijñāna Bhikṣu in the sixteenth century.

¹⁰ E.g. *citta* is not defined in the *Yogasūtra* nor is it listed as one of the *tattvas*.

commentaries on, the *Yogasūtra*, we have to be aware of the entire context of the particular period and tradition of the interpreters.

The Sanskrit word *smṛti* which occurs several times in the *Yogasūtra*, is quite consistently translated into English by most translators as “memory” (e.g. Woods 1914; Bangali 1976; Feuerstein 1989; Whicher 1995) or “remembering” (Hartranft 2003). As indicated earlier, there seems to be a close relationship and overlap between the two meanings of the term *smṛti* (Pāli *sati*) in Buddhism; the question here is whether the *Yogasūtra*, which is dated in the period when Buddhism flourished in India, may reflect both meanings of the term as well. There are instances in the text that evidence an influence of Buddhism on the *Yogasūtra* as noted already by several scholars (e.g. La Vallée-Poussin 1937, 223–42; Larson 1989, 129–46; Bronkhorst 1993, 71–77) which further incite inquiry into whether *smṛti* allows, besides being rendered as “memory,” alternative readings.

The term *smṛti* occurs in the *Yogasūtra* in six *sūtras*: four occurrences are in the first chapter (*samādhipāda*) which presents the foundations of yogic practice, and two occurrences in the fourth chapter (*kaivalyapāda*) which is the concluding section where, among other topics, the transformation and liberation of consciousness are discussed. The *Yogasūtra* starts with the definition of yoga as being the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness and then continues, in *sūtra* 1.6, with the listing of five types of fluctuations.

1.6: *pramāṇa-viparyaya-vikalpa-nidrā-smṛtaya*

[the fivefold fluctuations of consciousness are:] valid cognition,
misperception, conceptualization/imagination, sleep and
memory/mindfulness.¹¹

Here the text specifies what can occur within consciousness (*citta*); the term *smṛti*, being one of the five kinds of fluctuations, is consistently translated by all English translators as “memory” (e.g. Woods 1983, 19; Feuerstein 1989, 30) or

¹¹ All translations from Sanskrit are made by the author, partly drawing from translations by Feuerstein (1989) and Houston (1995). The Sanskrit text is translated into English only tentatively; the wide spectrum of possible renderings is sometimes marked by a forward slash, indicating that the given translation is rather optional. Only those Sanskrit terms are discussed here that have a direct relevance to the concept of *smṛti*.

“remembering” (Hartranft 2003, 5). Then the *sūtra* proceeds to define each of these five types of fluctuations of consciousness,¹² the last being *smṛti*.

1.11: *anubhūta-viśaya-asampramoṣaḥsmṛti*

Memory/mindfulness is not losing an experienced [sense-]object.

The term *smṛti* rendered as “memory” would imply that the object experienced is recalled from the past—which is the interpretation given by most translators and commentators; however, the *sūtra* gives no direct indication for this reading. The earliest commentator Vyāsa (probably from the fifth century C.E.) opens his comments with a question about whether the mind “remembers” (or, if read alternatively, “is mindful of”) cognition or the object of cognition.¹³ He continues that both cognition and the object are “remembered,”¹⁴ actually what is “remembered” (or read alternatively, “what one is one mindful of”) are mental impressions (*saṃskāras*), which manifest under appropriate conditions.¹⁵ Vyāsa’s interpretation of *smṛti* can be paralleled by the notion of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness (*smṛti/sati*) which is presented in the *Abhidhamma* as a mental factor (*cetasika*) that knows cognition and/or the object of cognition arising through one of the six senses (e.g. Bodhi, 1993, 286–87); it is similarly described in numerous passages of the *Suttapiṭaka*, particularly in the *dharmānupassanā* section of the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*. Later commentators on the *Yogasūtra* attribute to the term *smṛti* functions that could be rendered into English as “memory”; e.g. Vācaspatimiśra defines: “*smṛti* is concerned with objects which have already been made the object of one of the other fluctuations.”¹⁶ All modern English translations interpret *smṛti* in this *sūtra* as “memory” or “recollection” (e.g. Whicher 1998, 117; Woods 1914, 32; Bangali 1976, 6) or “remembering” (Feuerstein 1989, 33; Houston 1995, 1.11; Hartranft 2003, 6). It is only in the earliest commentary by Vyāsa that *smṛti* may be alternatively interpreted as mindfulness.

¹² The first four terms are briefly described in the *sūtra*: *pramāṇa* “valid cognition” comprises direct perception, inference and testimony; *viparyaya* “misperception” is false knowledge founded on appearance of what is not that; *vikalpa* “conceptualization/imagination” is without object, relying on language; *nidrā* “sleep” is a fluctuation founded on non-existent awareness.

¹³ *Yogabhāṣya* 1. 11: *kiṃ pratyayasya cittam smarati āhosvidviśayasyeti* (Arjunwadkar, 17).

¹⁴ Ibid.: *grāhyoparaktāḥ pratyayo grāhyagrahaṇobhayākāranirbhāsastajjātīyakam saṃskāramārabhate* (Arjunwadkar 2006, 17).

¹⁵ Ibid.: *sa saṃskāraḥsvavyañjakāñjanastadākārāmeva grāhyagrahaṇobhayātmikam smṛtim janayati* (Arjunwadkar 2006, 17).

¹⁶ *Tattvavaiśārādī* 1.11.2: *prāptipūrvāvāntiḥ smṛtistataḥ smṛtināmupajana ityārthau* (Arjunwadkar 2006, 17).

The following *sūtras* explicate how the cessation is achieved through practice (*abhyāsa*) and detachment (*vairāgya*) and list two types of cessation: distinguished (*saṃprajñāta*) which is accompanied by cognition and non-distinguished (*asaṃprajñāta*) without cognition. The latter is achieved when preceded by the five faculties, presented in 1.20.

1.20 *śraddhā-vīrya-smṛti-samādhi-prajñā-pūrvaka itareṣāṃ*

[Cessation] of the others [*asaṃprajñāta*] is preceded by faith, energy, memory/mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

The five faculties described in this *sūtra* are to be developed before the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness (*asaṃprajñātasamādhi*) is achieved. These faculties are identical (and even listed verbatim in the same order) to the frequently attested Buddhist five faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*), usually translated as “faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.” Although all translators of the *Yogasūtra* generally interpret *smṛti* as memory, in this *sūtra* only some translate this term as mindfulness (but render it memory in other *sūtras*) and acknowledge that *sūtra* 1.20 may reflect Buddhist influence: e.g. Feuerstein translates the term *smṛti* as mindfulness, defining it as “the practice of concentration and meditation,” and suggests that although the set of the five faculties may stem from Buddhism it may equally be “not particular to any one tradition” (1989, 40–41). Woods (1914, 20) renders the term as “mindfulness” and briefly acknowledges the Buddhist parallels. Vyāsa does not define or explain the term *smṛti* in this *sūtra* but focuses on how the five faculties condition one another respectively: from well-established faith arises energy, from energy memory, which further conditions mindfulness, concentration and wisdom or insight; hence, in his view, mindfulness is conducive to *samādhi*.¹⁷ Later commentators follow Vyāsa, further discussing how one factor leads to another and also give various equivalents for *smṛti*: most of them (i.e. Vācaspatiṃṣra, Vijñānabhikṣu, Nāgojībhaṭṭa) equate *smṛti* with the term *dhyāna*, the seventh limb of the “eight-limbed yoga” (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*) which is usually translated into English as “meditation” (Arjunwadkar 2006, 24–25) or interpret the term as “the recollection of past objects” (Maharaj 2013, 75). Dasgupta (1924, 102) follows these commentators and translates the term as “meditation,” however, he does not link the five faculties to Buddhism but argues that they are actually only aspects of yogic detachment (*vairāgya*) and practice (*abhyāsa*) (1924, 129). To my

¹⁷ *Yogabhāṣya* 1. 20: *smṛtyupasthāne ca cittamanākulam samādhiyate* (Arjunwadkar 2006, 26).

knowledge, only one traditional interpreter, Hariharānanda Āraṇya from the turn of the 20th century, attempts in his *Pātañjalyogadarśan* (published in 1911) to interpret the term *smṛti* as mindfulness or “continual mindfulness” (*sadā samanaskatā*) (Maharaj 2013, 64), and views it as the precondition for the development of *dhyāna*.¹⁸ Although his interpretation occurred a century ago and seems to be more plausible than traditional readings of *smṛti* it has not received sufficient scholarly attention so far (Maharaj 2013, 59, 77). It is evident that among the passages from the *Yogasūtra* discussed here in relation to *smṛti*, *sūtra* 1.20 indicates Buddhist influence most strikingly; several scholars have acknowledged this (e.g. La Vallée-Poussin 1937; Larson 1989); Bronkhorst (1993, 72–75) outlines some parallels, discusses the links to Buddhist *jhānas* and argues that *sūtras* 1.17–1.20 are taken from a different context or source.¹⁹ However, the links between the yogic and Buddhist interpretations of *smṛti* have received very scant attention so far.

The first chapter of the *Yogasūtra* continues with discussion on the different means to achieve cessation, and obstacles on the path to absorption (*samādhi*), stating the conditions for the achievement of cognitive absorption beyond cognition.

1.43: *smṛti-pariśuddhau sva-rūpa-śūnya-iva-artha-mātra-nirbhāsānirvitarkā*

[Cognitive absorption is] beyond cognition [*nirvitarka*], as if empty of its own form, [there is the] appearance of the object-only, when the memory is purified/when there is purification through mindfulness.

Translators render the *tatpuruṣa* compound *smṛti-pariśuddhau* in various ways: “on the purification of the depth-memory” (Feuerstein 1989, 53); “upon the purification of memory” (Houston 1995, 1.43); “when the memory is quite purified” (Woods 1914, 82); “[not] coloured by memory” (Hartranft 2003, 17). Here I propose an alternative reading of this compound, i.e. “when [there is] purification of/through mindfulness” for the following reason: the cognitive absorption is beyond cognition (*nirvitarka*), this is a state without fluctuations and hence, it would be problematic to read *smṛti* as memory because memory is

¹⁸ Hariharānanda Āraṇya’s contribution to the alternative reading of *smṛti* is examined in detail in the comprehensive and well presented article by Maharaj (2013).

¹⁹ Sujato (2005, 146) also explores, rather briefly, the links between the two traditions and proposes that practice of mindfulness is described in the *Yogasūtra*; however, he reads *smṛti* as memory but proposes the term *dhāraṇa* to refer to mindfulness, since the *Abhidharma* lists *dhāraṇa* as a synonym for *sati*; this hypothesis would require further research.

defined in the *Yogasūtra* as a fluctuation. Some commentators and translators try to resolve this problem by interpreting *smṛti* as the “depth-memory” or the “subconscious” (e.g. Feuerstein 1989, 53–54) without providing a convincing argument or evidence for their presumption. Parallels in the Pāli Buddhist Canon indicate a close relation of this *sūtra* to the descriptions of meditative absorptions (*dhyāna/jhāna*); e.g. in *Anupadasutta* of *Majjhimanikāya* (MN 111), where the fourth *jhāna* is described: “... in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither-pain-nor pleasure [there is] purity of mindfulness (*satipārisuddhi*) ...” (Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli 2009, 900).²⁰ *Satipārisuddhi* in this text may be alternatively read as “purity [achieved] by mindfulness”; the compound is actually interpreted in this way elsewhere, by Walshe in his translation of the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (2012, 86). Buddhist parallels (in the example given as well as in several other instances) indicate that mindfulness may be an alternative reading for *smṛti* in the *Yogasūtra* 1.43 and consequently imply parallels between the *nirvitarka samādhi* of the *Yogasūtra* and the descriptions of the fourth *jhāna* in Buddhism. Vyāsa’s commentary on *smṛti* also allows this alternative interpretation; he comments that *smṛti-parisuddhau* implies purification from ideas, inferences and words²¹ which corresponds to the purifying function of mindfulness in the development of the fourth *jhāna*.

The term *smṛti* occurs also in two *sūtras* in the last chapter of the *Yogasūtra* which focuses, among other topics, on final liberation (*kaivalya*). The chapter first talks about the development of psychic powers and then discusses the law of *karma*.

4.9. *jāti-deśa-kāla-vyavahitānām-apy-ānantaryam smṛti-saṃskārayor-ekarūpatvāt*

Because of the correspondence/uniformity between memory/mindfulness and mental impressions (*saṃskaras*), [there is] a succession [of *karma-vipāka* and *vāsanās*] even though they may be separated [in regard to] birth, place and time.

²⁰ The passage from the *Anupadasutta* (MN 111, PTS ed. 3. 26) in Pāli (underlined by the author): “*puna caparam, bhikkhave, sāriputto sukhasa ca pahānā dukkhasa ca pahānā pubbeva somanassadomanassāna atthaṅgamā adukkhamasukham upekkhāsatiipārisuddhim catuttham jhānam upasampajja viharati. ye ca catutthe jhāne dhammā—upekkhā adukkhamasukhā vedanā passaddhattā cetaso anābhogo satipārisuddhi cित्तेkaggaīā ca, phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittam chando adhimokkho vīriyam sati upekkhā manasikāro...*”

²¹ *Yogabhāṣya* 1. 42: *śabdasaṃketasmṛtipārisuddhau śrutānumānajñānavikalpaśūnyāyām samādhiprajñāyām...* (Bangali 1976, 22).

This *sūtra* continues the discussion on *karma* from 4.7 and 4.8; here *karma* is explained as continuation through time and space. The term *smṛti* is interpreted by most translators as “memory” (Woods 1914, 307; Houston 1995, IV.9) or “depth-memory” (Hartranft 2003, 61; Feuerstein 1989, 131) or even the “personal subconscious” (Feuerstein 1989, 131). Vyāsa comments on the causal relationship between memory (*smṛti*) and mental impressions (*saṃskāras*)²²: memory (*smṛti*) arises from mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) and mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) arise from memory (*smṛti*).²³ However, if *smṛti* is read alternatively as mindfulness it would indicate that mindfulness arises successively together with mental impressions (*saṃskāras*), witnessing arising of resultant *karma*. In the Buddhist view, *smṛti/sati* is presented in the *Abhidhamma* as one of fifty-two mental factors (*cetasika*) and one of fifty mental formations/impressions (*saṃskāras*) which are also classified as mental factors (*cetasika*). Memory/mindfulness (*smṛti*) can arise together with other mental factors (*cetasikas*) in various types of consciousness; from this perspective, *smṛti* and *saṃskāras* are uniform (*eka-rūpatva*), both being *cetasikas* which may occur in successive mind-moments, being subject to the conditions arising in time and space. In Buddhism, it is *smṛti* that conditions purification of consciousness (*smṛti-pariśuddhi*) which leads to the state of *samādhi*. Modern interpreters do not look into Buddhist parallels but read the term *smṛti* as memory, following the commentarial tradition, including Vyāsa who views *smṛti* as a manifestation of impressions (*saṃskāras*) and hence both terms are interpreted to be uniform (Dasgupta 1924, 108).

The last occurrence of the term *smṛti* is in *sūtra* 4.21, following the discussion as to whether consciousness can be conscious of itself and whether consciousness and its object can be known at the same time. In *sūtra* 4.20. it is stated that consciousness and its object cannot be cognised simultaneously; then the text continues with the problem of the regression of cognition.

4.21. *citta-antara-dṛśye buddhi-buddher atiprasaṅgaḥ smṛti-saṃkāraś-ca*

If consciousness could be perceived by another [consciousness] [this would lead to] regression from cognition to cognition and blending/confusion of memory/mindfulness.

²² The term *saṃskāra* is variously rendered into English: e.g. “subliminal activator” (Feuerstein 1989, 38); “habitual potency” (Bangali 1976, 100); “latent deposit” (Woods 1914, 304); “impression” (Whicher 1998, 99); cf. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v.

²³ *Yogabhāṣya* 4. 9: *jātidēśakālavayavahitebhyah saṃskārebhyah smṛtiḥ smṛteśca punaḥ saṃskārā ityevamete smṛtisaṃskārāḥ karmāśayavṛtilābhavaśadvyajyante* (Bangali 1976, 100); for detailed comments see Whicher 1998, 99–100.

The *sūtra* states that cognition (*buddhi*) cannot look at the cognition itself since this would lead to regression and confusion of memory. Here the term *smṛti* is interpreted by most translators as “memory” (Feuerstein 1989, 137; Woods 1914, 331; Houston 1995, IV.21; Hartranft 2003, 65). Vyāsa comments that if consciousness (*citta*) was grasped by another consciousness, this would lead to cognition (*buddhi*) grasped by another cognition and accordingly, the chain of cognitions would condition as many memories (*smṛti*), leading to confusion.²⁴ If *smṛti* is read in the context of mindfulness, it would imply that, as consciousness cannot be conscious of itself, similarly, mindfulness cannot be mindful of being mindful since this would lead to regression; this is evident from the Buddhist perspective since there is no self (*anātman*) who observes or is mindful but there is only the process of successive ever-changing mind-moments. However, this view is rejected by the commentators on the *Yogasūtra* because they presume the existence of a Self (*puruṣa*) the owner of consciousness, as stated by Vyāsa: “The views of *sāṃkhya-yoga* and others denote by the word *sva* “the Self” (*puruṣa*), the owner, the enjoyer/experiencer of the consciousness.”²⁵

This brief overview of all the occurrences of *smṛti* in the *Yogasūtra* suggests that the term *smṛti* may encompass a wider semantic field—similarly to the concept of *smṛti/sati* in Buddhism—and encourages further enquiry into the different connotations of the term in the ancient yogic traditions which should be studied in a wider context of the different meditative schools of the time. The alternative reading of *smṛti* in the *Yogasūtra* proposed here can imply that mindfulness may have been a legitimate meditation method in the earliest yogic traditions, perhaps similarly understood and practised as in Buddhism—which, in spite of the abundance of primary and secondary sources available, requires further investigations about mindfulness. In the earliest commentary on the *Yogasūtra* by Vyāsa, at least in *sūtras* 1.11., 1.20 and 1.43, the term *smṛti* may be alternatively read and linked to the concept of mindfulness as understood in Buddhism. Later commentaries do not shed any new light on the possibility of this interpretation of *smṛti* and largely reflect new developments of religious traditions of India at the time. Consequently, all yogic schools of modern yoga in India (e.g. those developed by Iyengar, Satyananda, Desikachar etc.) reflect new developments (such as “Neo-Vedānta,” devotional Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva movements)

²⁴ *Yogabhāṣya* 4. 21: *yāvanto buddhibuddhināmanubhavāstāvatyahsmṛtayaḥ prāpnuvanti tatsaṅkarāccaikasmṛtyanavadhāraṇa ca syādityevaṃ* (Bangali 1976, 107).

²⁵ *Yogabhāṣya* 4. 21: *sāṃkhyayogādayastu pravādāḥ svaśabdena puruṣameva svāminam cittasya bhoktāramupayantīti* (Bangali 1976, 107).

in their readings of the *Yogasūtra*, and consistently interpret *smṛti* with English term memory.

6 Conclusion

It has been only in the last decade that the concept of mindfulness has entered yoga, mainly in the “West,” under the influence of Buddhist meditation. Mindfulness, as interpreted in the context of modern Buddhism, is viewed as one of its key concepts and practical tools; it has been transformed and transplanted into new paradigms of the global spiritual and consumerist society. Consequently, mindfulness has also entered modern Yoga: presumably it is perceived, practised and interpreted in a different way to how it would have been in the time of the *Yogasūtra*, often separated from its traditional ethical and soteriological framework. The goals of mindfulness meditation are largely secularized: the goal of spiritual liberation (the main aim of the *Yogasūtra* as well as Buddhist meditation), if present at all, is a notion that has no immediateness—it remains a possibility in the future. The relatively new integration of the two traditions through mindfulness, though interpreted in new ways, initiates an enquiry about whether the synthesis of mindfulness and yoga is relatively new or perhaps is an ancient one, found already in the oldest recorded Indian texts on yoga, the *Yogasūtra*, perhaps lost in the yogic transmissions of India only to be reintroduced recently in a new context, with new interpretations and aims.

The analysis above suggests that *smṛti* in the *Yogasūtra* and in Buddhist traditions (Pāli *sati*) needs to be revisited; in both traditions the term seems to cover a wide semantic spectrum, ranging between “memory” and “mindfulness”—the two meanings may not have been separated the way they are in modern yoga, where the term is rendered as “memory” only and in modern Buddhism where *smṛti/sati* is usually read as mindfulness (and less frequently, as memory). It seems quite likely that the ur-text of Yoga, the *Yogasūtra* that we know today has been influenced by Buddhism and hence demonstrated here that it is possible to read *smṛti* as mindfulness, at least in some of the *sūtras*. However, there is no textual evidence that this meaning of *smṛti* has been transmitted in the Yogic traditions of India: the commentaries on the *Yogasūtra* (perhaps partly with the exception of Vyāsa) interpret the word *smṛti* as memory which has been followed by most modern translators and interpreters of yoga. Further in-depth study of meditation techniques such as mindfulness in ancient India is required, drawing from all

known traditions; this could create a broader spectrum of meanings and connotations for *smṛti* and other meditative terminology and practices of the time.

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