

### The Pursuit for Instances of Selflessness

In a recent article, "Meditation and Self-Control", Noa Latham defines the practices of concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation. As he defines the later, he excludes from his definition "experiences in which the subject/object distinction is subsequently described to have broken down" (Latham 1794). I understand subject/object distinction breakdown as a type of selflessness; i.e. a selflessness wherein one perceives oneself and an aspect or aspects of one's surroundings as a whole rather than as separate. In other words, I'm taking Latham's statement of exclusion to mean that if an activity causes someone to experience selflessness, then engagement in this activity cannot be regarded as an instance of concentration meditation or mindfulness meditation. The problem I will be addressing is that there exist practices that would otherwise fit into his definition and I believe should fit into his definition that are only excluded because of their display of selflessness. I believe these practices should be included because they induce the same meditative states Latham claims are induced through concentration meditation, and do so utilizing a nearly identical approach as the one Latham claims is used in concentration meditation. My solution to this problem is to propose an inclusion of practices displaying selflessness into Latham's definition of concentration meditation. I think it will also be found that expanding his definition of concentration meditation to incorporate these instances of selflessness will lead to the agreeable consequence of a more refined approach to the specific instances of concentration meditations associated with selflessness, that can even then be implemented more frequently

in contents not traditionally associated with meditation. In other words, I will explain how a new definition of concentration meditation allows for more frequent and refined meditative practices.

Latham uses the approach and terminology of contemporary philosophy of mind to investigate features of a broad range of meditative practices, and introduces the categories of concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation. His discussion is intended to provide a conceptual framework of these two forms of meditation and explore how they function as categories to better understand various instances of meditation, thought-control, and phenomenal experiences (Latham 1780-1781). To understand his first category, to concentrate, as Latham understands it, is to intentionally control the mind, to keep it focused on a single object. The object of focus can be sensed, perceived, or imagined. The main distinction between simply concentrating and practicing concentration meditation pertains to the object of focus. Latham defines concentration meditation as the intentional concentration on an object, with “an interest in the activity of concentrating or focus that transcends any specific interest in the object being focused on” (1786). The actual object of focus itself is interchangeable and rather unimportant, so long it doesn’t distract from the task of focusing. In this sense, the meditation is intended to have an emphasis on the act of focusing itself, whereas the object being focused on is functioning mainly as a means towards achieving this end that is a state of focus.

Being in a state of mindfulness meditation is similar to being in a state of concentration meditation, however instead of *controlling* their thoughts, one is simply *noticing* them. To be

mindful is to be in “the state of noticing the mental state at the focus of one’s consciousness” (Latham 1792). Similar to concentration meditation, one who is engaging in mindfulness meditation is doing so by practicing this “state of noticing” with an interest in the practice itself, rather than the mental states that are being noticed. Given their similarities, it is reasonable to ask at this point what is the important distinction between these two forms of meditation is.

Latham presents the main distinction between concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation as a difference in the type of thought that is being controlled. He categorizes the thoughts controlled while concentrating as first-order thoughts and those controlled while being mindful as higher-order thoughts (Latham 1779). However, I don’t think this is the primary distinction that should be held on to, but rather that the difference between the two forms of meditation should be understood as a difference between controlling thoughts versus noticing thoughts. I will now explain Latham’s rationale for distinguishing concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation using first-order and second-order thoughts, followed by an explanation for my personally derived significant distinction.

In the process of defining and distinguishing these various forms of concentration and mindfulness, Latham uses the terms first-order and higher-order thoughts. He claims that first-order thoughts are controlled through concentration and higher-order thoughts through mindfulness. First-order thoughts are defined as thoughts that do not have other mental states as their object of focus, and this object might be sensed, perceived, or most importantly, imagined (Latham 1780). I think it is in the case of a first-order thought pertaining to an imagined object that creates a complication. If the thought pertains to an imagined object, I

think it's likely to assume this thought is in fact about a previous time when the object *was* actually being sensed, and if so, the thought no longer fits the definition of a first-order thought because it pertains to another mental state. I realize this is not enough reason to reject his distinction, however, I do take it to be sufficient reason to avoid any further discussion of concentration and mindfulness as they apply to first-order and higher-order thoughts. I find a more compelling point of departure between the two meditations to be that of a difference in controlling versus noticing, and will be understanding concentration as it pertains to the control of thoughts, and mindfulness as it pertains to the noticing of thoughts. I find this to be the more significant distinction because it both distinguishes and emphasizes the fundamental actions taking place throughout the course of each of the two meditations. In addition, by differentiating these terms in this way, I can reduce the overall number of new terminology used in this paper and avoid having to discuss any complications the terms may bring about.

In the process of defining concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation, Latham excludes from his definitions any meditations that involve an experience of selflessness. It is in the course of defining mindfulness meditation that he categorizes experiences of selflessness as instances of "unintentional concentration" (Latham 1794). As I will now explain, by making this categorization, he excludes such experiences from his definition of concentration meditation. Latham states that "one condition for being engaged in concentration meditation at [time]  $t$  is intending to concentrate" (1786). One cannot unintentionally concentrate and intend to concentrate simultaneously, and for that reason experiences of selflessness, i.e. instances of unintentional concentration, are not instances of concentration meditation. This categorization also excludes such experiences from his

definition of mindfulness meditation, because to be mindful requires one to *notice* their thoughts whereas unintentionally concentrating would mean one is unintentionally *controlling* their thoughts. It is in this way that Latham excludes experiences of selflessness from his definitions of mindfulness meditation and concentration meditation.

It seems a little surprising to me that an account of meditation would make this exclusion because in doing so, various classic accounts of meditation can no longer be considered meditations by this definition. I'm now going to show that there exist certain practices of what Latham should recognize as concentration meditation, that also result in an experience of selflessness. The practices I will be using to demonstrate this are flow state and those that involve the mental state of single-pointedness, and I will start with the later. Meditative states involving single-pointedness are defined by maintaining an unwavering focus upon a single object, thought, or sensation (Khapa 368). By comparing this practice to Latham's aforementioned definition of concentration meditation, one finds a strikingly similarity, however, a major distinction between the two definitions arises around the matter of selflessness. As he explains the Tibetan Buddhist meditative practices that involve the mental state of single-pointedness, the Dalai Lama states that, "the meditative states experienced as a result of having generated single-pointedness of mind are altered states of consciousness that, in terms of their phenomenological aspects and also their mode of engagement with objects, closely correspond to states of existence in the form and formless realms" (Dalai Lama 9). The existence in the formless realm that he is here referring to, is a liminal state defined by its lack of both perception and non-perception, a realm in which distinction between self and non-self is not possible (Khapa 369). In other words, the Dalai Lama is referring to meditative practices

that closely resemble Latham's concentration meditation *and* cause a generation of single-pointedness; a state defined by its displaying of selflessness. This is a paradigmatic instance of a meditation seen within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that holds much resemblance to Latham's category of concentration meditation and also results in a state of selflessness. I take this instance to be sufficient in motivating engagement in a discussion to include instances of selflessness into Latham's definitions of concentration meditation. In addition to being motivated by this paradigmatic instance, I also think that Latham's definition of concentration meditation can actually be improved if it does not exclude experiences of selflessness.

Even though Latham officially excludes experiences of selflessness from his definitions, I think that the practice of concentration meditation would be more accurately defined if it includes these instances. A variation of these practices, defined by their correlation between maintaining focus and experiencing states of selflessness, can be found in the mental state physiologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines as "flow state". Csikszentmihalyi would also say that there are particular instances of when a person's intentions to concentrate are successful that can be categorized as an experience of "flow". The experience of flow, or optimal experience, as Csikszentmihalyi calls it, is a mental state that is commonly regarded as easier to recognize than it is to define. Psychologist Jan Stupacher defines flow state as "a pleasurable state of full engagement and concentration occurring during a seemingly effortless and automatic activity" (Stupacher 348). Csikszentmihalyi claims that while experiencing flow, "concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant... self-consciousness disappears" (Csikszentmihalyi 71). In this sense, flow can be understood as the sensation of a merging of action and awareness, the centering of attention

and concentration, intrinsic motivation, and the loss of the self-construct. A few activities that are likely to induce flow states include performing surgery, rock climbing, sailing, and playing an instrument (Csikszentmihalyi 32), each assuming, of course, that the person involved is familiar with and capable of the task at hand in each scenario. A rock climber describing an experience in a flow state would say that their consciousness was completely engaged with the task at hand, that they had no extraneous thoughts running through their head, and that they felt one with the wall (32). To feel one with a task or an object, as one does when engaged in a state of flow, is a common way of describing a lack of subject-object distinction, i.e. an experience of selflessness. In this way, it can be seen that flow state is an example of a concentration that also results in an experience of selflessness. I will now argue that despite this correlation between an experience of flow and experience of selflessness, flow should nevertheless be considered an instance of Latham's definition of concentration meditation.

As previously noted in the analysis of Latham's terminology, in order for an instance of concentration to qualify as an instance of concentration meditation, there must be an interest in the activity of concentrating or focus that transcends any specific interest in the object being focused on. This means that it is required that in order for a state of flow to qualify as a concentration meditation, the object being focused on cannot function as an object of interest in itself. The object of focus must rather function as a means towards the end of obtaining the state of focus itself, which is in fact what Csikszentmihalyi claims is a defining aspect of the flow state. Csikszentmihalyi states that a flow state is "an end in itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, the activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding" (Csikszentmihalyi 67). Flow state, being both an intentional form of concentration and an end in and of itself, can

therefore be understood as an example of concentration meditation. I have now established the experience of flow state as an example of a practice that both qualifies as concentration meditation and results in an experience of selflessness.

I will now begin to explore an interesting consequence that arises when approaching a given activity resulting in an experience of flow as a form of concentration meditation. I do so towards the end of developing a more comprehensive approach to the instances of concentration meditation that involve flow state. In her article “Consciousness and the Neuroscience of meditation”, author Antoine Lutz discusses a meditation that qualifies as a form of concentration meditation. Lutz defines the Tibetan Term Ts’e-cig Ting-ng’e-dzin as “a mental state in which the mind is focused unwaveringly and clearly on a single object” (Lutz 509). She says that this state, which is commonly translated as “Focused Attention” and literally translated to “‘one-pointed concentration’, occurs in many practices, and is a typical goal for the novices in the Chag-z’og traditions” (Lutz 509). She says that as a meditator engages in this specific state of concentration, they will seek to avoid the flaws of dullness and excitement. Dullness can be recognized as a dimming of the object of concentration or simply by the sensation of drowsiness within the meditator, whereas the flaw of excitement is occurring when the meditator finds themselves becoming distracted (501). The direct way to address excitement is to simply recognize that the mind has become distracted and redirect it back to the intended object of focus. The way to directly address the flaw of dullness would be to simply conjure up the volition to maintain focus. But, one can try to avoid these pitfalls by attending to the three elements of a meditation that I will now discuss.



Lutz discusses three elements that one can alter as they prepare for meditation, in order to avoid dullness and excitement. In the example she uses, the meditation is geared towards obtaining a state of Focused Attention. The elements that one can adjust are setting, body posture and object of concentration. The process of preparing oneself and one's environment for meditation should involve predicting how to best initialize these three elements in a way that will help to avoid the two overall flaws that were previously mentioned, dullness and excitement (Lutz 509). From there, throughout the course of the meditation, the elements may be adjusted further, if need be.

Preparation of the setting should include adjusting the intensity of the light, temperature, and aroma of a room. These factors can be intensified to counteract excitement and reduced to counteract dullness. A briefly visualized object intended to aid in the counteracting of either dullness or excitement is also commonly considered an aspect of setting. The brightness of this briefly imagined object should be one's primary consideration as they conjure up its image, as the brightness of the object has influence over whether it counteracts dullness or excitement. It is said that picturing a small black drop behind the naval can assist in reducing levels of excitement and the image of a small white light upon one's forehead can assist in counteracting dullness (Lutz 510). In this way, brightness correlates with excitement and darkness with dullness, and is often the main consideration when attending to the setting of a room. Changing the posture of the body is the second way to address issues of dullness and excitement. These changes are typically utilized as they correlate with either increased or decreased levels of tension. A straight back is primarily implemented, be it while sitting cross legged or in a chair. Traditional accounts will rarely involve a posture of laying

down, as this is too strongly associated with relaxation and dullness and will often not allow for a sufficient level of focus (Lutz 511).

Commonly regarded as the most important and final element of a meditation to consider in the process of avoiding dullness and excitement, is the object of concentration. The most common objects of concentration utilized in the development of Focused Attention include sensory objects, such as a visible object placed before the meditator, or a mental object, such as a visualized image (Lutz 509). In the development of Focused Attention, as with the majority of Tibetan Buddhist practices, the breath is not typically used as the object of concentration. Similar to the aspects of surroundings, the brightness of the object can be increased to address an issue of dullness, and decreased to address an issue of excitement.

I just provided the way in which three elements of a meditation can be adjusted to avoid the hinderances of dullness and excitement. By allowing flow state to be considered an instance of concentration meditation, a similar process of adjusting can be developed for the context of obtaining a state of flow. In the case of a flow state, the added element of the difficulty of the task can be considered and adjusted, as well. An example of this form of adjustment can be seen in the case of a musician practicing their instrument, say the drum set, for instance. If the drummer would like to obtain a state of flow during their process of practicing, she could choose a specific rhythm to play and change the tempo at which she plays it until finding one that matches the level of difficulty needed to assist her in maintaining her state of flow. So, if one were to interpret Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow as a state of concentration meditation as I argue Latham should, the process of selecting an activity of particular interest, with an

appropriate level of difficulty, can be regarded as a way of ensuring that their object of meditation appropriately prepares them for avoiding the hinderances of excitement and dullness throughout the course of their meditation. Viewing the process of object selection in this way is unique to meditative practices, and is applicable to flow state when the state is regarded as an instance of concentration meditation.

I argue that Latham's definition of concentration meditation should allow for an inclusion of practices resulting in a state of selflessness; one such practice being flow state. This bolstered definition of concentration meditation would encourage a practitioner to combine the adjustable elements found within all instances of concentration meditation; setting, posture, and object of focus, as well as the added element of the difficulty of the task that is specific to activities geared towards obtaining a state of flow. With this new definition, meditators should be considered aptly prepared to begin their pursuit of selflessness obtainable through the flow state, or as I argue it should be regarded as, concentration meditation. I will refer to this complete set of elements and the process of adjusting them as just that, the pursuit for instances of selflessness. I use the term "instances" to differentiate from the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of perpetual selflessness seen in states such as the formless realm. To continue with the example of the drummer mentioned before, I'll provide an example of how she might go about her drumming time with the intention of doing so as a form of concentration meditation geared towards obtaining a state of selflessness.

As she begins her preparations, the drummer would likely ensure that the setting was somewhat dimly lit, as not to draw too much attention to any visual elements that might

distract her from the focus on the activity. Then, she would sit down at her drum set with her posture tall and her shoulders relaxed. Her tall posture will ensure she doesn't fall into the trap of dullness, and her relaxed shoulders will keep her safe from the hindrance of excitement. The object of focus will be the activity of playing a short-repeated rhythm, and the element of difficulty will be addressed by her selection of the rhythm and the tempo at which she it to play it. She has now successfully completed her preparation, and is now ready to actively pursuit a state of selflessness. I'd now like to mention an interesting consequence that results when considering the concept of focus per se mentioned earlier and this newly developed pursuit for instances of selflessness.

As previously mentioned, a state of flow might result from a state of concentration that was initially pursued with an interest in the object of focus itself. An example would be when a student begins a series of math problems only because the problems were assigned for homework, and then finds them self fully invested in the task of completing the problems. It should be noted that at any point in time during a period of concentrating, the concentrator maintains the ability to shift their interest between the following two options: an interest in the object itself (not meditation), and an interest in the activity of concentrating that transcends specific interest in the object being focused on (concentration meditation). In other words, the interest in the activity can be seen as either being for the sake of the activity or for the sake of maintaining a state of meditation, and this option remains throughout daily activities as one shifts their focus from object to object or activity to activity. And whenever they might choose to maintain an interest in the activity of concentrating that transcends specific interest in the object being focused on, they can utilize the pursuit for instances of selflessness to ensure the

best quality for their meditative experiences. If it is the case that the object truly ceases to matter, then the breakdown of the subject/object distinction would be ideal.

Noa Latham excludes from his definitions of the practices of concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation any experiences of selflessness, or the perceiving of oneself and an aspect or aspects of one's surroundings as a whole rather than a distinction. The problem I exposed in his argument is that there exist practices of selflessness that would otherwise fit into his definition and I believe should fit into his definition, and are only excluded because of their display of selflessness. The primary example of this form of meditation that I discussed was the state of flow, also mentioning practices geared towards obtaining single-pointedness of mind as paradigmatic examples that motivate the discussion. My solution to this problem is to propose an inclusion of practices displaying selflessness into Latham's definition of concentration meditation. I also explained, how by expanding his definition of concentration meditation to incorporate these instances of selflessness, it leads to the development of a more refined approach to the specific instances of concentration meditations associated with selflessness. Namely, this approach incorporates not only adjusting the traditional elements of setting, posture, and object of focus, but also the difficulty of the activity that is functioning as the object of focus. Lastly, I showed how these forms of concentration meditation that incorporate selflessness can even be implemented more frequently in contents not traditionally associated with meditation.

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