

Evolution of Mindfulness – From Buddhism to the Contemporary World

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of mindfulness has changed over time, especially it has transitioned from its traditional roots into a modern version in psychology and popular culture. Altering the understanding or application of mindfulness is common, but it does raise issues to preserve the core principles of mindfulness. So, it is essential to see such distinctions to learn about the possibilities and the boundaries of contemporary mindfulness exercises. In this paper, the researcher seeks to trace the alternation of mindfulness from its early Buddhist script to current practices in the contemporary world, and the objective of the study is to (i) review the origin and foundations of mindfulness. (ii) Do contemporary world practices align with the original meaning of Buddhist teachings, or have they changed with context and made it different according to the needs of the hour? (iii) Is it acceptable to redefine the real existence of mindfulness? A comprehensive literature review was conducted to analyze the classical Buddhist text alongside peer-reviewed research and recent empirical studies on mindfulness-based interventions in clinical context. The findings revealed that the interventions of mindfulness are beneficial to the people, yet they lack ethical roots, and this will have an influence on the true meaning of mindfulness. To maintain the integrity of mindfulness, future applications, especially in clinical and public contexts, must acknowledge and incorporate its ethical foundations.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Sati, Secularization, Ethics, Buddhism, Contemplative practices

Mindfulness is often practiced as a secular technique for well-being, originating from the Buddhist context. Its practices centered on cultivating *focused attention* and *bare awareness*, especially through memorization and disciplined study (Anālayo, 2019). It is not a new term, but it exists in several forms with a different name in many religions.

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions, which uses *Dhyana* and *Japa* to develop concentration and self-realization, often through *chanting mantras* or *yoga* (Bhogal, 2023). *Samayik* in Jainism helps cultivate inner peace and detachment (Majumder et al, 2024). In Buddhism, *Sati* and *Vipassana* focus on awareness and freedom from suffering through the practices of mindful breathing and body awareness (Harvey, 2015). Christian practices like *contemplative prayer* and the *Jesus Prayer* seek closeness to God through silence and

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meditation (Sapatandekan et al, 2025). In Islam, *Dhikr* and *Tafakkur* promote remembrance of God and inner peace through repeated prayer and reflection (Maftuhin, & Yazid, 2025), and many other religions practice mindfulness in their way. Each tradition uses its language and methods, reflecting its unique worldview and spiritual aims (Koenig, 2023; Shaiby & Devaseelan, 2024). Despite differences, mindfulness and their similar practices across religions have been shown to support mental health, emotional resilience, and spiritual growth (Koenig, 2023; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Aldbyani, 2024), but the practices of mindfulness in Buddhism are more popular and it influenced the Western world too.

Origin of Mindfulness in Buddhism

Buddhism is the fourth most practiced religion with over 500 million followers worldwide (Johnson et al., 2015). Emerging in Northern India 2,500 years ago, profoundly focused on the cultivation of the mind as a path to achieve liberation from suffering. The core element of this journey is mindfulness, a concept and practice that has persisted through the ages.

In early Buddhist texts, mindfulness, known as *sati* in Pali and *smriti* in Sanskrit, holds significant importance in Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and meditation practices (Nirban, 2018). The word ‘*sati*’, translated as ‘mindfulness’ by Davids (1881) primarily denotes ‘recollection’ or ‘memory.’ This includes both retrospective memories recalling past events or experiences and prospective memory which is about thinking of future tasks. It is inseparable ethical precepts, compassion, and the cultivation of wisdom, which make it a holistic approach to personal and spiritual development (Anālayo, 2020; Olendzki, 2011; King, 2022; Shulman, 2024). Further, spiritual journey is concerned with liberation and transformation of consciousness, with much emphasis on ethical conduct and wisdom (Bodhi, 2013; Anālayo, 2020; Olendzki, 2011; Seegers, 2024; Shulman, 2024).

In the *Samanna-phala Sutta*, the Buddha emphasizes that mind training begins with profound trust in the path, dedicating oneself to the guidance offered by the Buddha, the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the community of Buddhists) (Walshe 1987, p.99, as cited in Kang & Whittingham, 2010). He did not present mindfulness as a separate technique but as one of the basic elements of the eightfold path: the right mindfulness, an integral component on the journey to spiritual awakening, and a capability that must be cultivated and honed throughout one's entire spiritual life (Shonin et al., 2015, p. 2). Sujato (2011) articulates, mindfulness serves as a type of guardian of senses, bestowing the situation of it with circumspection, dignity, and composure to the meditator. It does not allow the practitioner to be lured by chasing makeshift sense pleasures, which may give way to attachment and suffering.

The Buddha particularly emphasized being consciously aware of the body, using that awareness to cultivate mental clarity and balance (Anālayo, 2021). He initially experimented with various Indian Ascetic practices, such as fasting and breath control, but found them insufficient for awakening. Importantly, He did not reject all pre-existing Indian ascetic practices but adapted them thoughtfully, redefined these practices through the lens of mindfulness.

Early Buddhist Practices for Mindfulness

There are four foundations of mindfulness practices (Bodhi, 2010), these are:

1. *Kayanupassana* (contemplation of the body): It is the initial form of mindfulness that involves fostering awareness of various aspects of the physical form (Kittikong, 2015). This includes observing the *breath*, maintaining awareness of bodily *postures*

such as walking, sitting, and standing and bringing mindful attention to *daily activities* like eating, cleaning, or dressing (Anālayo, 2021; Bodhi, 2010 p.67).

- 2. **Vedanaupassana** (mindfulness of feelings): here, observing bodily and mental sensations as they arise, focuses on recognizing the emotional or affective tone associated with each experience, helping the practitioner develop insight into how these feelings influence reactions and perception (p.71).
- 3. **Cittanupassana** (mindfulness of the mind): It deals with one's mental states with clarity and awareness. By paying close attention, the practitioner can better understand their thoughts and feelings which help to balance mental stability and understanding (p.73).
- 4. **Dhammanupassana** (contemplation of phenomena): It specifically categories dhammas that shape one's inner and outer experiences. It includes a direct contemplation of the Four Noble Truths, understanding of suffering, its origin, cessation, and the path that leads to liberation from it. Ultimately, these early practices demonstrate how mindfulness became a versatile and essential tool for spiritual growth and personal transformation in early Buddhism. Such transformations reveal the flexible yet disciplined nature of early Buddhist mindfulness leads to enlightenment (p.74).

The development of a keen sense of awareness often begins with simply observing one's breath. This foundational observation can lead to a deeper awareness of bodily sensations, external stimuli, and gentle observation of thoughts and emotions as they arise. Engaging mindfully in everyday activities- such as walking, eating, or speaking—serves to anchor attention in the present moment (Leggett, 2022). This practice of attentiveness is not an end in itself rather, it aims to foster insight, ethical discernment, and liberation.

Mindfulness Practice in West

Mindfulness, as a concept and practice was nurtured in South Asia initially and later spread in Thailand and other parts of Asia. At a much later date, it was introduced and followed in the English- speaking world (Agarwal, 2018, p.35). Today, it holds both religious and clinical connotations that have been successfully integrated into secular environments and widely embraced within Western popular culture (Nirban, 2018).

The western engagement with mindfulness was largely catalyzed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues in the late1970s at the university of Massachusetts Medical Center (Salmon, et al., 2004, p. 438), who introduced *the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program. After this, several third-wave therapies were developed, consisting of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive therapy (MBCT) (structured mindfulness practices like sitting meditation), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (integrates mindfulness with other behavioral strategies) (Kang, & Whittingham, 2010).

Mindfulness based Stress Reduction

MBSR designed to deal with stress and enhance well-being, marked a turning point, recontextualizing mindfulness from a spiritual discipline into a psychological well-being. It consists of eight-week, group-based session and its core practices include: *Body scan meditation*-systematically guides attention throughout the body to foster awareness and relaxation. *Hatha Yoga*-featuring gentle movements to restore physical vitality and combat disuse atrophy. *Sitting meditation* to encourage self-observation and long-term practice (Kang, & Whittingham, 2010 p. 439). Kabat-Zinn (1982) found that MBSR significantly

reduced pain intensity and improved psychological well-being in patients with chronic pain. Later, Kabat-Zinn et al. (1992) and Miller, Fletcher, and Kabat-Zinn (1995) reported a sustained improvement in anxiety and panic symptoms following the intervention. Kaplan et al. (1993) observed symptom reduction and greater pain control among fibromyalgia patients, Speca et al. (2000) revealed decreased mood disturbances and stress symptoms in cancer patients, and Teasdale et al. (2000) showed that MBSR reduced relapse rates in individuals with major depression. Additionally, Randolph et al. (1999) reported improvements in pain coping and overall functioning among chronic pain sufferers.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

MBCT consists of 8 group sessions once a week that is combined with mindfulness exercises and the aspect of the cognitive-behavioral method to prevent individuals with major depression, along with non-clinical groups to promote well-being (Sipe & Eisendrath, 2012; Dimidjian et al., 2016; Segal et al., 2002). It helps people relate to their thoughts and feelings in a more positive and healthier way by focusing on accepting them and staying in the present moment rather than trying to fight or change specific cognitions.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy

DBT is an evidence-based treatment that was initially developed to treat patients with borderline personality, especially persons having chronic suicidality and self-harm (Koons, 2008). Experts found that DBT could also help teenagers and young people who struggle with serious issues like drug or alcohol use, eating disorders, and emotional dysregulation in general, with promising results (Swales, 2018; Asarnow et al., 2021; Dimeff & Linehan, 2008; Neacsu et al., 2014; MacPherson et al., 2012). DBT structured approach and adaptability make it useful for treating different types of people with individual therapy, group skills training, therapist consultation teams, and phone coaching (Granato et al., 2020; Linehan & Wilks, 2015; Rizvi et al., 2024).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

ACT is a modern behavioral therapy that focuses on present moment, non-judgmental awareness that teaches acceptance of internal experience and commitment to value-based action as well as avoid or control unpleasant thoughts (cognitive defusion) (Krafft et al., 2019; Bennett & Oliver, 2019; Dindo et al., 2017; Coyne et al., 2014; Hayes, 2016). Unlike MBSR or MBCT, ACT does not rely on traditional practices or Buddhist roots. Instead, it defines mindfulness behaviorally to enhance psychological flexibility allowing individuals to act in line with personal values despite of emotional challenges (Kang & Whittingham, 2010).

The contemporary ‘mindfulness movement’ has simplified and recontextualized the concept to suit modern lifestyles, therapeutic settings, and made it more accessible. It is inherently adaptable and has been redefined to fit individual, organizational, and therapeutic needs. (Gärtner, 2013; Schuman-Olivier et al., 2020).

Traditional vs Modern Adaptation of Mindfulness

Traditional mindfulness techniques are paying attention to the breath; observing sensations in the body, listening to external and internal stimuli, observing the flow of thoughts or emotions in the mind, deep meditation and ethical living, aiming for long-term transformation (Sharf, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2015; Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009). Whatever the mechanism, the cultivation of attention remains central (Kabat-Zinn 2004). In contrast modern psychological applications often define mindfulness narrowly as present-centered,

nonjudgmental awareness disconnected from its ethical and spiritual foundations (Purser & Milillo, 2015).

Contemporary mindfulness, such as MBSR and MBCT, often focus on symptom relief, stress reduction, and psychological well-being. These programs are typically secular, sometimes omitting explicit ethical teachings and spiritual context (Monteiro et al., 2015; Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009; Chiesa & Dwivedi, 2011). These interventions used limited time and group sessions, focusing on practical outcomes like stress reduction and emotional regulation.

Loss of Ethical Roots

Mindfulness, described as the intention to guard, and is seen as its foundation or basis for the latter two trainings: concentration and wisdom. (Tsiring 2004, p.41 as cited in Kang & Whittingham, 2010). However, changing the meaning too much or removing it from its ethical and cultural roots may risk losing important aspects of mindfulness, such as its role in meaning-making and ethical living (Garland et al., 2015; Chems-Maarif et al., 2025; Hanner, 2024; Kirmayer, 2015). Empirical studies highlight that ethical instruction in mindfulness practice increases prosocial behaviors such as charitable giving and enhances personal growth among people with high levels of empathy. Without ethics, mindfulness may not consistently promote prosocial outcomes and, in some cases, may even diminish charitable behaviour in some individuals (Chen & Jordan, 2020; Xiao et al., 2020).

Moreover, Western definitions frequently omit the ethical dimension, which is central to Buddhist mindfulness. Some scholars argue that reintroducing ethical-mindedness could bridge the gap between traditional and modern understandings, preserving the depth and integrity of the practice (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016; Shulman, 2024).

Applying mindfulness in clinical and public health settings requires sensitivity to these religious and cultural differences. Practitioners must remain aware of the religious origin and contextual meanings of mindfulness to ensure that it fits the beliefs and values of different communities (Koenig, 2023; Palitsky & Kaplan, 2019).

The divergence between traditional and contemporary interpretations raises critical questions. The flexibility of mindfulness has facilitated its adaptations across various domains, including clinical psychology, education, and corporate wellness. This transformation has also sparked debate about the potential loss of meaning. For instance, a misunderstanding such as equating ‘acceptance’ with ‘passivity’ can misrepresent both the intent and impact of mindfulness practice definitions (Choi et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness, deeply embedded in Buddhist tradition, has evolved into a global phenomenon adapted across cultural, religious, and in secular contexts. It nurtured through presence of mind, daily attentiveness or awareness and ethical conduct which leads to inner clarity and calm. While, its modernization in various therapeutic contexts such MBSR, MBCT, DBT and ACT has broadened its reach and helps individuals in day-to-day stress, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. These are powerful tool which enhance awareness and promotes personal growth. However, these bifurcate mindfulness into techniques which disconnect it from its spiritual and ethical roots. So, it is important to ensure alignment with its foundations to preserve its original depth and purpose. Scholars and experienced practitioners bring a nuanced understanding of mindfulness with its traditional roots with

conceptual clarity and respect for its origins before applying to modern areas like education, healthcare or digital technology. (Michalak et al., 2019; Hassed, 2022; Malin, 2022; Monteiro et al., 2015; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Additionally, integrating core aspects such as meditation, insights and moral values with secular methods. It can be both enriched and better aligned with present day needs.

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Conflict of Interest

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