

A GLIMPSE OF MINDFULNESS: A DESK-BASED COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BUDDHIST ORIGINS AND MODERN APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Background: Mindfulness has radically transformed from its classical Buddhist foundations to its widespread adaptation in contemporary therapeutic practices. Originating in early Buddhist teachings, mindfulness (*sati*) is portrayed not merely as present-moment awareness but as an integral component of the ethical and liberating path toward Nibbana. However, contemporary mindfulness-based interventions often emphasize symptom reduction, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being, abstracting them from their original ethical and soteriological contexts. *Objectives:* The objectives of this paper are to present a comparative review exploring the historical development, philosophical frameworks, and evolving applications of mindfulness. *Methods:* This study employs a qualitative method, drawing extensively on secondary sources, including Buddhist and contemporary psychological literature. A critical comparative analysis is conducted to examine the theoretical foundations, ethical frameworks, and practical implementations of mindfulness across classical Buddhist and modern therapeutic contexts. The analysis is interpretive and thematic, focusing on philosophical coherence, contextual adaptation, and socio-cultural implications. *Results:* The study demonstrates significant divergences between traditional Buddhist mindfulness and contemporary mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). While Buddhist mindfulness is ethically grounded and oriented toward liberation (Nibbana), modern MBIs often prioritize psychological benefits, stripped of ethical context. However, mindfulness shows proven therapeutic value, but its secularization and commercialization risk conceptual distortion and potential harm, especially when applied without ethical or clinical safeguards. *Conclusion:* This study highlights the need for a more integrative approach to mindfulness that respects its ethical and philosophical foundations while adapting to contemporary therapeutic applications. It calls for more precise distinctions between Buddhist, spiritualized, and clinical mindfulness to ensure responsible practice and meaningful application.

Keywords: Buddhism, Mindfulness, Modern Psychology, Sati, Vipassanā

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Introduction

Initially rooted in early Buddhist teachings as a path toward ethical living and liberation, mindfulness today is often separated from its religious context and adapted into various secular practices. In recent decades, mindfulness has gained widespread adoption in therapeutic and clinical settings, becoming a popular tool for reducing stress, regulating emotions, and promoting overall psychological well-being. However, this modern application of mindfulness often departs significantly from its original formulation in early Buddhist teachings, where *sati* is situated within an ethical and soteriological framework aimed at liberation (Nibbana). Traditional Buddhist mindfulness is integrated with the Threefold Training — *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) — and is not merely a cognitive technique but a path to spiritual transformation.

This divergence between classical and contemporary interpretations has profound implications. When mindfulness is abstracted from its ethical roots and commodified as a neutral, performance-enhancing tool, it risks losing its depth, integrity, and transformative power. Revisiting and comparing these frameworks are essential to safeguard the original purpose of mindfulness and to promote more ethically grounded therapeutic practices. Such an inquiry can also help educators, clinicians, and practitioners better contextualize mindfulness in a way that respects both its heritage and its contemporary utility.

While a considerable body of literature exists on Buddhist mindfulness and modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) separately, there remains a lack of integrated, desk-based comparative analysis that critically examines their philosophical foundations, applications, and ethical implications in tandem. This study addresses that gap by providing a comprehensive review of both traditions, highlighting their convergences, divergences, and the consequences of their evolving interpretations.

Objectives

The primary purpose of this study is to conduct a desk-based comparative review of mindfulness, tracing its development from early Buddhist teachings to its contemporary adaptations in psychological and therapeutic contexts. The study aims to clarify the philosophical, ethical, and practical divergences between traditional Buddhist mindfulness and modern mindfulness-based interventions. It aims to support practitioners, scholars, and the general public in understanding mindfulness as both a psychological technique and a profound spiritual practice, rooted in ethical and liberating goals. Additionally, the study highlights both the benefits and potential drawbacks of mindfulness practice, particularly when implemented without a comprehensive understanding of its original ethical framework.

These objectives are pursued through the following research questions:

- How was mindfulness originally conceptualized within early Buddhist teachings?
- How has the understanding and application of mindfulness changed in modern contexts?
- What are the benefits and risks of modern mindfulness practices when removed from their traditional ethical and doctrinal frameworks?

Methodology

This study employs a comparative approach within a qualitative methodology to examine the evolution of mindfulness from its early Buddhist roots to its contemporary therapeutic applications. The study is primarily relying on *Pāli* canonical texts, classical commentaries, contemporary Buddhist scholarship, and peer-reviewed psychological literature on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). Based on a thematic approach, the study analyses and compares the theoretical foundations, ethical frameworks, and practical implementations of mindfulness across classical Buddhist and modern therapeutic contexts. A critical textual analysis method also applies to interpret doctrinal meanings from Buddhist sources such as the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas. It integrates this with discourse analysis of modern mindfulness literature to explore recent conceptual transformations. No clinical or experimental data collection is

conducted. This methodological framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of how mindfulness has been redefined and repurposed across cultures and disciplines.

Literature Review

The practice of mindfulness has deep historical and philosophical roots within early Buddhism, yet its modern adaptations have shifted considerably in both purpose and application. This review examines key literature on the evolution of mindfulness, highlighting its doctrinal foundations, interpretive transformations, and clinical applications.

Origins and Historical Transmission of Mindfulness

The term "mindfulness" can be loosely translated to convey the idea of a "conscious mind" or being aware, encapsulating a particular mental quality. Indeed, some English dictionaries translate "mindfulness" as the state or quality of being mindful or aware of something. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "mindful" as "remembering somebody/something and considering them or it when you do something" (Hornby et al., 2015). The APA dictionary defines mindfulness as "awareness of one's internal states and surroundings." The concept has been applied to various therapeutic interventions to help people avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by observing their thoughts, emotions, and other present-moment experiences without judgment or reaction (VandenBos & Association, 2015). The English-Pāli dictionary defines mindfulness as "*Appamāda*" (Buddhadatta, 1989). The Pāli word "*Appamāda*" means "thoughtfulness, carefulness, conscientiousness, watchfulness, vigilance, earnestness, and zeal."

The origin of the word "mindfulness" in Buddhist studies dates back to the 19th century. Prior to that year, there was no evidence of the term "mindfulness" being used in canonical texts or writings. Around 1850, scholars specializing in oriental studies translated the Pāli word "*sammā-sati*" as "correct meditation" and the Sanskrit word "*smṛti*" as "conscience." Robert Spence Hardy translated the term "*catu-satipatthāna*" as "the four subjects of thought" (Hardy, 1853, p. 497), while "*sati-sambojjhanga*" was rendered as "the ascertainment of truth by application" (p. 498). It is important to note that during this period, these translations did not use the term "mindfulness."

Among scholars specializing in oriental studies, Thomas William Rhys Davids, an English scholar of oriental studies, is the first to use the term "mindfulness." He introduced this term in his book "Buddhist Suttas" (Davids, 1881). In this book, he translated the Pāli term for "*sati*" as "mindfulness." In the book's initial pages, the author translated the Pāli word "*sati*" as "mental activity" (p.9;14). Subsequently, he used the term "intellectual activity" when translating the Pāli term "*sammā-sati*" (p. 63). Moreover, on the same page, he utilized the word "thought" in the translation of the term "*sati-bala*" within the context of "*pañña-bala*" (five powers) and "*sati-sambojjhanga*" concerning "*satta-bojjhanga*" (Davids, 1881). In the latter sections of the book, particularly when translating the term "*sammā-sati*," Rhys Davids shifted to using the term "mindfulness," rendering it as "Right Mindfulness" (p. 144, 147, 150, 306). Thus, during the 1880s, it appears that Rhys Davids did not employ a consistent and fixed term for translating the word "*sati*."

In his work "The Dialogues of the Buddha (*Dīgha nikāya*)," Thomas William Rhys Davids consistently used the word "mindfulness" to translate the Pāli term "*sati*" (Davids, 1899). He is recognized as a pioneering scholar who introduced the term "mindfulness" in Buddhist studies, and his usage of this term has influenced the development of mindfulness practice.

In the Post-1900s, numerous Buddhist scholars and writers extensively adopted the concept of "mindfulness" when translating the Pāli term "*sati*." Venerable Soma Thera (1941) from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) notably translated the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta and its commentary (*aṭṭhakathā*). He published a book entitled "The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipatthāna Sutta and Its Commentary" (Thera, 1941). His translation book gained widespread acclaim and garnered the attention of the mindfulness community. It stands out as a prominent and popular work on mindfulness, following in the footsteps of Rhys Davids.

Following Soma Thera's influential work, another meditation book achieved fame: "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness,"

authored by the German Buddhist monk Venerable Nyanaponika (Nyanaponika, 1954). Renowned for its practical approach, simplicity, and readability in English, Nyanaponika's book gained popularity among Western readers. Initially published in Ceylon in 1954, the book did not gain significant recognition. However, after undergoing editing and amendments, it was republished in London in 1962 and garnered widespread fame (Nyanaponika, 1962). Venerable Nyanaponika stayed in Burma in 1952 for a period of training in *Vipassanā* under the guidance of the meditation teacher, Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw (Thera, 1986, p. xvii). The meditative practices he undertook provided not only personal enrichment but also significantly contributed to the depth and insight reflected in his book. Then, his book proved invaluable for Westerners engaging in modern mindfulness interventions, offering a foundation and guide informed by traditional Buddhist practices.

Since then, mindfulness practices have gained prominence, particularly among Western backpackers and within the hippie culture of that era. Western travellers visiting the East during this time were crucial in introducing meditative traditions to the West. This shift from the *Pāli* word "*sati*" to "mindfulness" became renowned not just linguistically but also for its emphasis on practical application through various practices.

In this way, the term "mindfulness" was initially translated from the *Pāli* word "*sati*." Over time, it evolved into a mindfulness meditation practice, the foundation and development of "*sati*." Subsequently, these mindfulness meditation practices transitioned into mindfulness-based interventions within the clinical field. Today, mindfulness is recognized as a translation of the *Pāli* word "*sati*," and it is a practical and effective daily life practice with diverse applications.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices, which aim to develop mindfulness or awareness, have been transmitted by ancient Buddhas. Being mindful of an object or feeling is commonly referred to as mindfulness. Traditionally, this practice is known simply as meditation. In Buddhism, mindfulness practices are often categorized under the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are;

- Mindfulness on Body (*kāyānupassanā*): observe and contemplate the body in all its aspects, including its positions (standing, sitting, lying down, etc.), its actions, and its parts (organs, tissues, etc.).
- Mindfulness on Feeling (*vedanānupassanā*): observe and contemplate the range of feelings and sensations triggered by their experiences.
- Mindfulness on Mind (*cittānupassanā*): observe and contemplate the mind in all its complexity, including its various mental states, qualities, and processes.
- Mindfulness on Phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*): observe and contemplate the various mental phenomena or mental objects.

All these mindfulness practices are rooted in the Buddhist teachings of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*. Therefore, to truly understand mindfulness, it is essential to be acquainted with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* and related literature.

Secular Adaptation in Modern Clinical Settings

The American *Vipassanā* Movement stimulates modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). The contemporary MBIs have evolved to be more secular and devoid of religious affiliations, although these are based on Buddhist *vipassanā* meditation. The secularization of mindfulness seeks to make it accessible to people from diverse religious backgrounds, highlighting its therapeutic benefits without imposing any particular belief system. MBIs provide practical tools for reducing stress, promoting emotional regulation, and enhancing overall well-being by focusing on present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental observation of thoughts and sensations. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is the pioneer and foremost among the many MBIs. Its popularity and success laid the foundation for other MBIs to develop.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is an eight-week program grounded in scientific research, offering comprehensive training in the practice. MBSR assists individuals coping with stress, anxiety, depression, and pain through the secular mindfulness approach. It was created in the 1970s by University of Massachusetts Medical Center professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, combining mindfulness meditation and Yoga. Jon Kabat-Zinn first learned mindfulness from Zen Buddhist teachers such as Philip Kapleau, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Seung Sahn, as he has a connection with the Cambridge Zen Center (K & Rai, 2023). He combined the knowledge of Yoga, Vipassanā meditation, Soto Zen, and Advaita Vedanta and made observations from a scientific perspective.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is a psychotherapy that combines elements of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness practices. It was specifically developed to address major depressive disorder (MDD). MBCT is derived from the model of cognitive vulnerability to depressive relapse, and it focuses on the patterns of negative thinking that could lead to depressed moods. MBSR highly influences MBCT. However, unlike MBSR, MBCT is a form of psychotherapy.

Research suggests the therapeutic value of MBCT in treating MDD (Crane, 2013). Although it was developed initially for MDD, research shows it is effective for anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, other depressive-related disorders, low mood, unhappiness, depression-relapse prevention, and treatment-resistant depression (Sipe & Eisendrath, 2012). Therefore, clinicians and psychotherapists widely use MBCT these days.

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a modified CBT. The primary purposes are teaching people how to live in the moment, develop healthy ways to cope with stress, regulate emotions, and improve relationships. The primary focus of DBT is the treatment of borderline personality disorder (BPD), but it has since been adapted for use in treating a variety of other mental disorders. Marsha M. Linehan, a psychology researcher at the University of Washington, developed this approach. She dedicates considerable time to her academic research and Zen meditation practice.

Marsha Linehan's DBT approach is grounded in a biosocial model that identifies difficulties with emotion regulation as the primary symptom of BPD. Linehan suggests that a combination of biological factors and a lack of a validation-providing environment contributes to this dysfunction (Linehan, 1993, p. 62). For long-term issues with controlling emotions, DBT can be helpful because it integrates mindfulness activities.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a psychotherapy that emphasizes acceptance to deal with automatic negative thoughts, feelings, symptoms, or circumstances. It encourages increased commitment to healthy, constructive activities that uphold the values or goals. ACT therapists operate under the premise that enhancing acceptance can lead to increased psychological flexibility (Wetherell et al., 2011). This approach offers numerous advantages, potentially helping individuals break the cycle of habitually avoiding particular thoughts or emotional experiences, thereby mitigating further problems.

In contemporary psychology, mindfulness has gained significant popularity, and mindfulness-based interventions have become a prominent trend, particularly in Western societies. This popularity has translated into substantial financial opportunities, with mindfulness generating revenue through various channels, including internet websites, mobile applications, and other platforms.

For instance, in 2019, the top 10 meditation startups collectively generated \$195 million in revenue, representing a notable 52% increase over the previous year. Moreover, projections indicate that customer spending on meditation and mindfulness apps is expected to rise between 2020 and 2023 (Popovych, 2023).

This economic aspect underscores the expanding role of mindfulness beyond its traditional focus on physical and mental health. Today, mindfulness practices are recognized for their potential contributions to economic growth, educational advancement, and the development of social welfare.

Benefits of Mindfulness Highlighted in Buddhist Texts and Modern Scientific Studies

The seven primary benefits of practising mindfulness from the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas are;

- i. Purification of beings' psychology
- ii. Overcoming grief and sorrow
- iii. Overcoming lamentation
- iv. Relieving physical pain
- v. Releasing mental pain
- vi. Attainment of the noble path
- vii. Realization of Nibbana

According to the discourse, the practitioner must practice mindfulness with ardency, clear comprehension, and mindfulness to overcome covetousness and dejection in the world.

In the Anuruddha-Saṃyutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, numerous instances underscore the benefits of Satipaṭṭhāna practice. In the Ambapālivana Sutta (SN 52.9), it is described that Venerable Sāriputta, noticing the clarity and radiance of Venerable Anuruddhā, asked him about his current meditation practice. Venerable Anuruddhā explained that he had been meditating with a strong foundation in the four kinds of mindfulness, maintaining a keen awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and principles while remaining free from covetousness and discontent toward the world. Indeed, according to this account, mindfulness meditation is associated with benefits such as clarity, purity, and brightness of complexion. Interestingly, this resonates with contemporary discussions on meditation and its potential effects on skin health, as evidenced by the interest among women and beauty bloggers in achieving a radiant complexion through meditation practices.

In an advanced education course at the Face & Body Northern California show on August 21, 2023, a study explored the correlation between skincare and mindfulness. Research elucidated how spa professionals can help clients integrate self-care practices to enhance their skin's well-being. He emphasized that mindfulness practices are a potent antidote to stress, fostering relaxation and a positive mindset among clients. By cultivating present-moment awareness, these practices enable individuals to positively impact their skin health. Researcher recommended incorporating breathing rituals at the outset of aesthetic appointments to immerse clients in a mindset of self-care and deep relaxation (Spa, 2023). Mindfulness helps prevent physical ageing and promotes rejuvenation (Yuen & Baime, 2006). Those who practice mindfulness often exhibit youthful bodies and beautiful skin (Thero et al., 2022). The radiant and clear complexion of Venerable Anuruddhā is a testament to the exemplary results of mindfulness practice.

Moreover, in the Bāḷhagilāna Sutta (SN 52.10), it is recounted that while Venerable Anuruddhā was gravely ill in the Dark Forest near Sāvathī, several mendicants visited him and asked what meditation he practised to manage his physical pain. Venerable Anuruddhā explained that he maintained his mind firmly in the four kinds of mindfulness, cultivating awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and principles. By doing so, he prevented pain from overwhelming his mind through the abandonment of attachment and aversion. Undeniably, there is a ton of research on the application of mindfulness in palliative care (Latorraca et al., 2017; Poletti et al., 2019), pain management (Day et al., 2014; Gardner-Nix, 2009; Majeed et al., 2018), and for patients with chronic diseases (Merkes, 2010; Niazi & Niazi, 2011).

Furthermore, mindfulness is considered a helpful complementary therapy for Alzheimer's Disease (Giulietti et al., 2023; Lima et al., 2020). Besides, it is also beneficial for heart health (Delizonna et al., 2009; Tung & Hsieh, 2019). Additionally, it supports the cardiovascular system and is recommended for those with hypertension, according to cardiologists (Kusko et al., 2024; Ponte Márquez et al., 2019). According to a 2017 Journal of the American College of Cardiology publication, individuals with poor

heart health often have reduced Heart Rate Variability (HRV). This reduction is associated with an increased risk of death from heart disease, sudden cardiac arrest, and respiratory issues. However, research indicates that those who regularly engage in mindfulness practices have higher HRV, which benefits heart health (Kirk & Axelsen, 2020).

Mindfulness also offers significant benefits for cancer patients. Practicing mindfulness exercises helps these patients endure pain, manage stress, and reduce the progression of cancer symptoms (Mehta et al., 2019; Xunlin et al., 2020). As research has indicated, programs like MBSR have shown effectiveness in treating breast cancer patients (Ledesma & Kumano, 2009; Speca et al., 2006). Moreover, mindfulness is beneficial for individuals with cancer and other chronic diseases, such as diabetes (Whitebird et al., 2009).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mindfulness practices that enhance immunity became popular (Black & Slavich, 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 2018). Stress hormones released during mental distress can weaken the immune system. Cortisol, the stress hormone, can have adverse effects on physical health and lower immunity. As COVID-19 infection rates and mortality rates rose, the resulting stress directly and indirectly weakened immune defences. Health measures restricting outdoor activities increase unwanted stress and discomfort, compromising immunity and raising infection risks. Mindfulness was mainly utilized during this period to reduce stress and boost immunity. By practicing mindfulness, individuals can mitigate stress-induced hormones and promote the production of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which are associated with happiness in the brain (Edwards et al., 2011; Esch, 2013). This leads to both mental and physical well-being.

For monastics, it is believed that by diligently cultivating the four kinds of mindfulness meditation, they are unlikely to disrobe or abandon their monastic life. The Salaḷāgāra Sutta (SN 52.8) illustrates this by stating that even if rulers, ministers, friends, colleagues, or family members try to persuade them to leave the monastic life and pursue wealth and comfort, those who have deeply immersed themselves in mindfulness meditation are unlikely to be swayed. Their minds have become inclined towards seclusion and spiritual practice, making it improbable for them to return to a worldly life.

Another well-known benefit of mindfulness is its impact on eating habits. Mindful eating practices have gained popularity in both clinical settings and everyday life. Research indicates that mindful eating can balance body weight (Dunn et al., 2018; Moor et al., 2013), combat obesity (Mantzios & Wilson, 2015), and promote mental well-being (Khan & Zadeh, 2014). Individuals can develop healthier relationships with food by cultivating awareness and mindfulness during meals, leading to improved physical and psychological health outcomes.

The Doṇapāka Sutta (SN 3.13) from the Samyutta Nikāya recounts the story of King Kosala, who struggled with obesity due to his inability to control his eating habits. In response to his plight, the Buddha suggested practising mindful eating habits. The verse from the sutta emphasizes the importance of mindfulness and moderation in eating: "When a man is always mindful, knowing moderation in eating, his discomfort fades, and he ages slowly, taking care of his life." Inspired by this teaching, the king contemplated this verse daily before his meals, recited by a young boy. Over time, the king experienced a reduction in body weight and successfully combated obesity. This story serves as an illustration of the benefits of mindful eating as taught in Buddhist texts.

In Buddhism, it's essential to recognize that the benefits associated with mindfulness, as mentioned earlier, are not its primary objective but natural byproducts of its practice. As many are aware, Buddhism's ultimate aim is to attain Nibbana, characterized by the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion, or, in essence, the cessation of craving (*taṇhā*). The Taṇhākkhaya Sutta (SN. 52.7) elucidates that those who cultivate mindfulness consistently will gradually diminish desires and ultimately reach a state free from craving.

According to research findings, over 16,000 scientific research publications on mindfulness have been published between 1966 and 2021 (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021). Today, mindfulness is one of the most prominent and promising avenues for students and researchers, offering ample opportunities for future academic pursuits and exploration. Psychologists, clinicians, mental health professionals, and

researchers widely acknowledge that mindfulness is an effective tool for addressing a range of mental health issues. These include depression (McCarney et al., 2012; Schreiner & Malcolm, 2008; Strauss et al., 2014), anxiety (Schreiner & Malcolm, 2008; Sipe & Eisendrath, 2012; Wetherell et al., 2011), stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Niazi & Niazi, 2011), PTSD (Hopwood & Schutte, 2017; Williston et al., 2021), OCD (Hale et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2004), bipolar disorder (Chu et al., 2018; Lovas & Schuman-Olivier, 2018), personality disorders (Elices et al., 2016; Linehan, 1993; O'Toole et al., 2012), and various other mental health conditions. Additionally, mindfulness is recognized as a beneficial intervention for patients dealing with grief (Hasha, 2015; Lew, 2021), suicidal ideation (Chesin et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2006), self-harm behaviours (Argento et al., 2022; Thew et al., 2018), and preventing relapse in depression (Kuyken et al., 2008; Shallcross et al., 2015). Moreover, mindfulness has shown promise in addressing issues such as sleep difficulties (Chan et al., 2022), obesity (Mantzios & Wilson, 2015), and eating disorders (Turgon et al., 2019).

Mindfulness is also used in various organizations, including the military, to produce efficient soldiers and to help those with high stress or psychological trauma from combat (Hepner et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021). It is increasingly discussed in initiatives for global peace (Thien & Tu, 2019) and environmental conservation (Barbaro & Pickett, 2016).

In today's modern world, mindfulness can be applied to almost everything. Whether you want to be happy and prosperous, sleep well, lose weight, look beautiful, succeed in the workplace, produce knowledgeable individuals, foster good employees, or create effective soldiers, Mindfulness is now the solution for all.

The contemplative practices within Buddhism, specifically the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, are not solely directed towards mundane affairs but are fundamentally aimed at transcendent objectives. In contrast, modern mindfulness, as practised in the West, primarily focuses on reducing daily stress, enhancing happiness, and promoting mental and physical well-being. While seemingly aligned with Buddhist practices, these benefits are considered by Buddhists to be secondary outcomes—byproducts of engaging in spiritual practices that ultimately aim at liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

Modern mindfulness approaches tend to address immediate daily suffering with a focus on quick relief, leading some scholars to label these practices as short-term palliative measures. As mindfulness gains popularity and demonstrates its benefits through numerous studies, it has also become commercialized, leading to what critics term "*McMindfulness*." This commercialization often diverges significantly from the original teachings of the Buddha, which emphasize the reduction of self-attachment and the realization of non-self (*anattā*).

Unlike the Buddha's mindfulness, which is deeply intertwined with the Eightfold Path and aims for ultimate liberation (*nibbana*), modern mindfulness often focuses on enhancing individual capacities, improving performance, and achieving material success. This shift in focus has led to a greater emphasis on physical development at the expense of spiritual growth, with mindfulness employed even in corporate settings to boost productivity.

Criticisms and Ethical Concerns

Western scholars have begun to investigate whether the persistent emphasis on the benefits of modern mindfulness practices overlooks the potential negative consequences. Although the Buddha asserted that consistent practice of his mindfulness techniques would invariably yield beneficial outcomes, contemporary adaptations under the guise of "modern appropriateness" and a focus on results rather than adherence to foundational theories have introduced inconsistencies into modern mindfulness practices.

The primary weakness among modern mindfulness innovators is their insufficient theoretical framework. They have selectively adopted fragments of the practice, resulting in unforeseen negative consequences. This selective application, driven by some entrepreneurs' desire for rapid results and financial gain and the lack of emphasis on ethical foundations, has led to criticism and recognition of potential harms within contemporary mindfulness practices (Dunkley & Loewenthal, 2013).

Mindfulness is indeed a personal right and practice accessible to all. However, pursuing it without the necessary foundational preparations and ethical considerations can lead to adverse outcomes. While it may appear beneficial to the individual practitioner, it can harm society.

There are now instances where mindfulness, derived initially from Buddhist teachings to foster non-violence and compassion, is used by military personnel to enhance combat readiness and resilience. This reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the practice's ethical basis. For Buddhists, the foundation for developing mental capabilities is moral conduct. Without a secure ethical foundation, cultivating mental powers is unattainable or, if attained, ineffective.

Consider an individual who practices mindfulness daily, achieving high mental tranquillity, emotional regulation, and situational awareness. This person also possesses the ability to understand others' intentions and adapt effectively to different circumstances. Now, imagine that this individual is a murderer. With advanced mindfulness skills, they could become an exceptionally precise and efficient killer, posing a significant threat to society. The prevalence of unsolved murders could increase because these individuals practice mindfulness without adhering to ethical principles.

An individual with poor moral conduct who can regulate emotions and remain calm might become a danger to their surroundings. Hence, mindfulness practices should emphasize ethical conduct. Without a foundation in moral principles, mindfulness alone cannot yield the highest benefits. It might provide basic tranquillity and momentary peace, but these states, coupled with intellectual capacities, can potentially cause harm to society.

From a behavioural perspective, mindfulness practices require such changes even if one does not adopt ethical views but merely modifies behaviours to align with moral conduct. Behavioural transformation is crucial. Without these changes, if a person suffering from a mental disorder practices mindfulness, it could exacerbate their condition, potentially leading to psychosis.

Research indicates that individuals with psychosis should not initially engage in mindfulness practices (Dyga & Stupak, 2015). Psychosis patients are disconnected from reality; they experience delusions and hallucinations. Asking such individuals to observe reality and remain mindful can worsen their condition. They might become more entrenched in their delusions and hallucinations, leading to worsened mental states. Therefore, it is essential to first stabilize these patients with medications and behavioural adjustments before introducing mindfulness practices. Mindfulness should be used as a supplementary treatment rather than a primary one, becoming highly beneficial once the patient is ready for mental rehabilitation.

Consequently, some mental health professionals conclude that mindfulness can sometimes exacerbate conditions in psychotic patients. Furthermore, various types of meditation, including those that combine religious or cosmic energy beliefs, can be dangerous for individuals with bipolar disorder. While basic breathing exercises are generally safe, complex meditations incorporating philosophical or metaphysical teachings can worsen the condition of individuals in a manic phase (Sharma et al., 2022). Thus, mindfulness should be approached cautiously and tailored to the individual's mental health status.

A 2018 study highlighted that mindfulness practices can significantly alleviate depressive symptoms and anxiety in individuals with bipolar disorder, yet they tend to exacerbate manic symptoms (Chu et al., 2018). This indicates that while mindfulness is essential for individuals with bipolar disorder, its application must be carefully managed. Medications can help control emotional dysregulation in the short term, but long-term management requires mindfulness-based interventions. However, it is crucial to avoid using these treatments during manic phases.

These facts suggest that improper use of mindfulness can lead to adverse effects. The risks arise not only from weak theoretical foundations but also from neglecting behavioural adjustment strategies.

Buddha's original mindfulness, Western contemporary spiritual mindfulness practice, and modern psychological mindfulness usage should be considered distinct. Buddha's mindfulness involves introspection without judgment, free from desire and aversion, which some contemporary mindfulness

practitioners overlook. Modern mindfulness also incorporates spiritual practices, such as chakra work, sound therapy, and manifestation techniques, blending principles of inner and outer attraction.

The foundational Buddhist mindfulness encompasses four primary practices, and its ultimate goal is nibbana, with seven key objectives outlined in the teachings. In contrast, modern mindfulness includes a range of practices with diverse and often indefinite goals. Additionally, Buddhist mindfulness is integrally connected with other elements of the Eightfold Path, such as right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), and right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), all of which are interrelated (MN. 117). However, modern mindfulness often stands alone, detached from ethical conduct (*sīla*) and other foundational principles of Buddhism.

Furthermore, Buddhist mindfulness is based on core doctrinal concepts, including the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, suffering, and non-self), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and the Four Noble Truths. On the other hand, modern mindfulness often lacks a theoretical framework and does not incorporate these fundamental teachings.

Thus, while Buddhist and modern mindfulness share superficial similarities, their underlying purposes and methodologies are fundamentally different. As the saying goes, "The West and the East shall never meet," modern mindfulness and traditional Buddhist mindfulness are gradually diverging. To facilitate clear understanding, it is essential to distinguish between Buddhist Mindfulness, Westernized mindfulness spiritual practices, and Modern Psychology Mindfulness.

Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature reveals a significant divergence between Buddhist and modern applications of mindfulness. While both traditions acknowledge the psychological benefits of mindfulness, they differ fundamentally in purpose, scope, and ethical orientation. The Buddhist framework integrates mindfulness into a path toward liberation, emphasizing moral restraint and wisdom. In contrast, contemporary clinical models prioritize mental health outcomes within a secular framework, often detaching mindfulness from its ethical origins. This study addresses the resulting gap by comparing these traditions, analyzing both their synergies and limitations, and exploring how future applications might balance clinical efficacy with philosophical integrity.

Findings

The study identifies several key findings:

- **Semantic Transformation:** The term “mindfulness” has undergone significant shifts in meaning, evolving from a morally infused meditative quality (*sati*) to a generalized form of nonjudgmental awareness used in psychological contexts.
- **Philosophical Divergence:** Traditional Buddhist mindfulness is oriented toward spiritual liberation and ethical purification, while modern MBIs are generally aimed at reducing symptoms, improving cognitive functioning, and enhancing performance.
- **Commercial and Secular Expansion:** Mindfulness has evolved into a multimillion-dollar industry, with mobile apps, wellness programs, and military adaptations influencing its usage in ways that may conflict with its original ethical roots.
- **Clinical Benefits and Risks:** While mindfulness has been validated as effective for stress, depression, anxiety, and chronic illness, it may exacerbate conditions such as psychosis or bipolar disorder if applied without ethical and psychological readiness.
- **Typological Distinction:** The study proposes three distinct streams of mindfulness in contemporary discourse:

(a) Buddhist mindfulness, grounded in *sīla-samādhi-paññā* and aiming at *Nibbana*.

(b) Westernized spiritual mindfulness, influenced by New Age and mystical traditions.

- (c) Modern psychological mindfulness, grounded in secular therapy models like MBSR and DBT.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a clear divergence in the understanding, application, and purpose of mindfulness between its traditional Buddhist roots and its modern therapeutic adaptations. The semantic transformation of the term “mindfulness” illustrates not merely a linguistic evolution but a profound shift in conceptual orientation. In the early Buddhist context, *sati* is inseparable from the ethical and soteriological framework of the Noble Eightfold Path, functioning as a mental quality cultivated for spiritual awakening. However, in modern psychological discourse, mindfulness has largely been redefined as a neutral, nonjudgmental awareness technique, employed to alleviate symptoms of mental distress and improve well-being.

This transference in meaning is closely tied to the philosophical divergence identified in this study. Traditional Buddhist mindfulness is grounded in moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), ultimately aiming at the cessation of suffering (Nibbana). In contrast, modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), such as MBSR, MBCT, and ACT, often dissociate mindfulness from its ethical and transcendental aims, emphasizing instead symptom reduction, emotional regulation, and cognitive performance. This instrumentalization reflects broader trends in secular psychology and biomedical paradigms, where efficacy and utility often take precedence over ethical or spiritual integrity.

Furthermore, the study has shed light on the role of commercialization and secular expansion in shaping contemporary mindfulness practices. As mindfulness becomes embedded in consumer markets, mobile technologies, and institutional frameworks (e.g., corporate training, military resilience programs), it risks losing its grounding in introspective inquiry and ethical transformation. The widespread commodification of mindfulness reflects a form of “McMindfulness,” where the depth and rigor of the practice are sacrificed for accessibility and market appeal.

A critical concern raised in this analysis is the clinical application of mindfulness without sufficient regard for theoretical and ethical foundations. While extensive empirical evidence supports mindfulness’s efficacy in treating depression, anxiety, and chronic illness, improper use—especially among individuals with psychotic or bipolar symptoms—can be harmful. The uncritical adoption of mindfulness by mental health professionals, often stripped of ethical orientation and doctrinal insight, poses potential dangers to vulnerable populations.

To clarify the current landscape, the study proposes a typological distinction among three streams of mindfulness: (a) Buddhist mindfulness grounded in the path of liberation; (b) Westernized spiritual mindfulness influenced by New Age and mysticism; and (c) modern psychological mindfulness embedded in clinical paradigms. Recognizing these distinctions is crucial for both scholarly analysis and responsible application.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while contemporary mindfulness practices have made significant contributions to mental health and well-being, they also represent a profound conceptual departure from their Buddhist origins. The secularization and commercialization of mindfulness, though enhancing global reach and acceptability, have led to ethical dilution and philosophical reductionism. Modern MBIs often emphasize functionality—relief of stress, emotional regulation, or performance enhancement—rather than cultivating insight into the nature of suffering and selfhood.

Importantly, the findings urge mindfulness practitioners, clinicians, and scholars to revisit the original context and intent of *sati* as taught in the early Buddhist tradition. Integrating ethical foundations and doctrinal understanding into mindfulness-based programs is essential, not only for preserving the authenticity of the practice but also for safeguarding its psychological integrity and social impact.

Moving forward, future research should adopt an integrative, interdisciplinary approach that bridges traditional Buddhist frameworks with modern therapeutic innovations. Such an approach would honor mindfulness not merely as a technique for mental adjustment but as a comprehensive path for personal transformation, ethical development, and liberation from suffering.

Abbreviation

AN. *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 5 Volumes. 1885-1990. London: P.T.S.

MN. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 3 Volumes. 1948-1951. London: P.T.S.

SN. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 6 Volumes. 1884-1904. London: P.T.S.

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