

Bridging Ancient Buddhist Wisdom and Modern Psychology: A Critical Review of Mindfulness-Based Interventions

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Abstract- This study reviews the similarities and differences between traditional Buddhist mindfulness and modern mindfulness-based interventions in psychology. Mindfulness is an important part of Buddhism; it is a non-judging, conscious focus on the present moment used for meditation and moral behavior. However, mindfulness-based therapies, such as MBSR and MBCT, have transformed mindfulness into a secular therapy in which the objective is to reduce stress and manage symptoms. A systematic review of the academic databases resulted in studies that compared the definitions, practices, mechanisms, and ethical considerations of these traditions. While both techniques share a conscious and non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, resulting in mindfulness, there are striking differences regarding the ethical and spiritual dimensions, the length of the meditation practices, and the ultimate goals of mindfulness. Buddhist mindfulness is part of a set of moral rules and wisdom, whereas in the case of MBIs, mindfulness is usually out of context. These differences raise the question of whether secular adaptations are true and honest. More research should be conducted to elaborate on conceptual definitions, research how effectiveness can be improved based on ethical considerations and help in the discussion between Buddhist and psychological paradigms. The review emphasizes the necessity of balancing accessibility and adherence to the essential principles in the current practice of mindfulness.

Keywords: *Mindfulness, Buddhism, Mindfulness-Based Interventions, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT); Secular Adaptations, Present-Moment Awareness*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness in Buddhism is the process of being consciously aware of the present moment without

judgment. This can be developed through meditation and ethical living and is therefore a fundamental aspect of Buddhist learning. The Pali word *sati* means memory, attention, and awareness. In Buddhist Doctrines, mindfulness is close attention to thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations to understand human experience and eliminate suffering. It is based on the philosophy of holism, which incorporates morality, wisdom, and a meditative focus, and demonstrates how the mind identifies right and wrong. This perception within Western psychology has turned into a model of mental health and general well-being. Contemporary mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) originate in the traditions of Buddhism but are usually simplified for use in medical and secular settings (Knabb, 2010). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) are designed to reduce stress, emotional regulation, and symptom management, particularly with the help of MBSR. MBSR was applied in the late 1970s to chronic pain and stress by Jon Kabat-Zinn as part of mainstream healthcare. MBCT was subsequently developed to avoid depressive relapse by combining mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral approaches and became universally accepted by both researchers and practitioners. (Lin et al., 2022)

The secularization of mindfulness is one subject of keen reflection on how modern trends — perhaps related to, or simply in opposition to — its Buddhist basis. We need to understand the relationship between mindfulness and these changes if we are to make sense of its philosophical and therapeutic meanings in the times we live in now (Wang, 2025). This review attempts to bridge these gaps by exploring the parallels

and contrasts between Buddhist mindfulness and psychological practices. Research questions: What are the differences in the definitions and models of mindfulness across traditions? What are the similarities and differences in meditation practices? What is the link between the mechanisms and clinical outcomes from a Buddhist perspective? This study also examines the ethics of secularizing mindfulness. The point has been to add a greater layer to the knowledge of mindfulness as a spiritual practice and therapeutic process (Koenig, 2023).

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

a. Search strategy and selection criteria.

In this study, a comprehensive search has been conducted using some of the leading scholarly databases in the fields of psychology, medicine, and religious studies. The major databases were PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and web of science. The search included a combination of words that included mindfulness, Buddhist meditation, mindfulness-based interventions (MBSR and MBCT), and psychological and ethical factors (Calderone et al., 2024). The Boolean operators and truncations were used to narrow down the search results to gather pertinent literature in different fields. The criteria that were used to include peer-reviewed articles and reviews were those that were published in the English language and focused on mindfulness as viewed through the lens of Buddhism or studies on modern psychology. Studies were required to appropriately investigate at least one of the following: definitions, meditation practices, mechanisms, effects, or ethical dimensions of mindfulness. Thus, they excluded non-academic sources or papers with insufficient empirical or theoretical depth that are not in direct dialogue with the convergence or divergence of Buddhist and psychological accounts of mindfulness. The screening was performed in multiple steps.(Chems-Maarif et al., 2025)

The titles and abstracts were first screened to eliminate irrelevant records. The ratio of full texts was then evaluated based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Screening was performed by two independent reviewers, and disagreements were resolved by

discussion or by referencing a third reviewer to increase reliability. The studies chosen were classified to extract data and evaluate their quality. This methodological process allowed us to conduct a narrow but broad review of the literature that existed so that the synthesis of conceptualizing and utilizing mindfulness in Buddhism and psychological systems was exemplified in a solid manner.(Wang, 2025)

b. Data Mining and Quality Evaluation.

In Buddhism, mindfulness is perceived as a non-judging state of being aware of the present moment. It is developed with the help of meditation and appropriate life ethics—the fundamental elements of the Buddhist way of enlightenment. The Pali word *sati* is translated as memory, attention, and awareness. In Buddhist cultures, mindfulness is the careful focus on one thought, feeling, and physical sensation to know how to experience and lessen suffering(Lomas, 2017). Such indigenous practice is holistic, bringing together morality with wisdom and meditation to help with ethical and spiritual progress in life. In contrast, mindfulness practices in Western psychology have been converted into a systematic set of methods that serve as therapeutic instruments aimed at increasing mental and physical well-being. Indeed, modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are sometimes inspired by Buddhist traditions but prevaricate explicit references to religious or ethical topics to retain a clinical framework that is secular and non-religious. Key examples include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late 1970s, MBSR was the first-of-its-kind meditation intervention to utilize mindfulness-focused healing methods. (Van Gordon et al., 2013)

These approaches were originally aimed at introducing the practice of mindfulness meditation into mainstream healthcare at a time when the major emphasis was on the reduction of chronic pain and stress. MBCT, which later became widely popular, combines mindfulness meditation with cognitive-behavioral skills and is mainly designed to prevent depression recurrence, assist in emotional regulation, and symptom management, in addition to enhancing

mood control and coping mechanisms. There is increasing demand for these programs and increasing scientific and medical interest in mindfulness and this process of research. However, the secularization of mindfulness raises a serious question about what connects them in the context of modern techniques with Buddhist roots. (Francis et al., 2024) This is important knowledge of this balance in the current therapeutic and philosophical context of mindfulness. With the growth of mindfulness-based therapies in this field and the broad attention they have received from the general public, the question is: What connection do these therapies have to their Buddhist origins? Furthermore, more systematic studies are required to determine whether contemporary treatments conserve the critical ethical and philosophical aspects of mindfulness or are an attempt to reinterpret secularly. (Dunne, 2011)

The search strategy involved a systematic search of several academic databases that the researcher was sure would provide much information about psychology, medicine, and religious studies. The most vital databases were PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science. The keywords were mindfulness, Buddhist meditation, mindfulness-based interventions (MBSR and MBCT), and their psychological and ethical aspects. The searches were narrowed using Boolean operators and truncations to allow relevant literature in many fields to be located. (Sabé et al., 2023) The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles and reviews of any kind published in English presenting mindfulness as Buddhist or presented in modern psychological theories. The inclusion criteria included studies that covered the definitions, meditation practices, mechanisms, effects, or ethics of mindfulness. (Furnell et al., 2023).

The exclusion criteria were used to filter out non-academic sources, articles that were non-empirical or lacked theoretical rigor, and studies that were not directly related to the convergence or divergence of Buddhist and psychological mindfulness. Screening was performed in several phases. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were examined to rule out irrelevant records. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were then checked against the full texts of potentially relevant articles. The screening was performed by two independent reviewers to increase reliability, and any disagreements were resolved by discussion or

consultation with a third reviewer. A list of the selected studies was compiled to extract the data and further quality appraise the studies. (Wieczorek et al., 2024)

This systematic search process led to the effective selection of literature to ensure that a very strong synthesis could be made to understand mindfulness as conceptualized and operationalized in Buddhist and psychological settings. It is developed in the form of meditation and ethical behaviour and is a key element of the Buddhist way of enlightenment. Mindfulness is translated to mean the Pali word, *sati*, which translates to memory, attention, and awareness. In Buddhism, mindfulness means paying a lot of attention to thoughts, emotions, and sensations of the body, as it allows one to research the nature of the experience and eradicate suffering. (Van Lutterveld et al., 2024) This field is well incorporated into the holistic framework, which includes moral teachings, wisdom, and meditative concentration, and has demonstrated the interconnectedness of mindfulness with moral and spiritual development.

The popularity of such programs and their formation testify to the presence of an increased number of scientists and therapists interested in the advantages and processes of mindfulness. However, it is unclear how much these modern forms of mindfulness resemble the original Buddhist practices or how they differ. The recognition of the duality of mindfulness has promoted its investigation as a treatment tool and a subject of modern philosophy. With the growing popularity of mindfulness-based therapies and the development of research studies, it is important to critically evaluate their relationship with the original Buddhist practices upon which they are based. (Furnell et al., 2023) When comparing traditional Buddhist mindfulness with its modern application in clinics, it has been determined that these two therapeutic practices do not exclude the philosophical and ethical principles; on the contrary, they are a secular and practical adaptation of them. The chosen methodology made it possible to select the literature in a strong way, providing both Buddhism and psychology with a perspective on the perception and application of mindfulness. At its core, mindfulness is the presence of awareness without judgment or

purpose. Meditation and moral behavior develop this awareness, which is an essential part of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. The name itself is derived from the Pali word, *sati*, which means memory, attention, and alert awareness. Mindfulness is explained as the attentive notice of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in Buddhist studies, and this method is designed to improve the comprehension of experience and decrease misery. This insight forms a larger system that incorporates moral principles, wisdom, and meditation, in which the most important relationships between mindful awareness, ethical development, and spiritual growth are emphasized.(Wang, 2025)

III. RESULTS

a. Study Characteristics

The review encompassed many study designs on a widespread scale. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, such as clinical trials, observational studies, theoretical essays, and ethnographic narratives, were systematically discussed in the review. The participants comprised multiple groups (Elf et al., 2024). The clinical cohorts with diagnoses, including individuals with conditions such as depression and anxiety, and non-clinical cohorts with the goal of enhancing their well-being. Most interventions investigated were structured programs, primarily Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). These standardized programs are typically six and 12 weeks in duration and are implemented in clinical, academic, and community sectors.(Gkintoni et al., 2025)

- *Psychological indicators* (e.g., perceived stress and severity of depressive symptoms).
- *Physiological indicators* (e.g., cortisol levels as a biomarker of stress).
- *Qualitative feedback* (i.e., participant-reported experiences and perceived changes).(Huh et al., 2021)

Although several studies showed high methodological rigor, there was a discrepancy in sample sizes, control conditions, and reporting transparency. Consequently, the findings must be interpreted with caution.(Garg et al., 2024).

b. Theories and Conceptualizations of Mindfulness.

The definitions of mindfulness in Buddhist writings and modern psychological sources are very different. In Buddhist philosophy, the Pali word *sati* refers to an enigmatic mental skill, nonjudgmental present-centered concentration, which is cultivated in an ethical, spiritual context. It involves recollection, consciousness, and wisdom, which ultimately results in the cessation of suffering. In contrast, psychological models are more likely to describe mindfulness as a deliberate, current mindfulness and acceptance that is typically implemented in behavioral and cognitive terms. Attention regulation, body awareness, emotional control, and a non-reactive attitude to internal experiences are considered core elements. The similarity between the two traditions can be seen in the awareness of the present and the use of non-judgmental observation. Nevertheless, psychological directions tend to exclude ethical, philosophical, and spiritual (soteriological) aspects to adjust mindfulness to secular and clinical practice(Chems-Maarif et al., 2025).

c. MMP. Mindfulness Meditation Practice.

Focused breathing, body scanning, and open awareness of thoughts and sensations without attachment and judgment are the primary meditation techniques used in MBSR and MBCT. These are modified versions of traditional Buddhist meditations. Traditional Buddhist meditation, however, is a wider and deeper collection of practices, such as ethical practice (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and insight (*vipassana*), all of which lead to spiritual enlightenment. Although both traditions develop long-term attention and awareness, they differ in their depth, ethical background, and objectives. Buddhist meditation is aimed at spiritual freedom, while MBSR and MBCT are more focused on psychological well-being and symptom management(Samuel, 2014).

d. Mechanisms and Effects

Research on mindfulness indicates that it influences various psychological and neurobiological processes, including attentional control, meta-awareness, emotional self-regulation, and rumination (Van Der Velden et al., 2022). Neuroimaging research has shown that mindfulness-based practice affects brain

processing pathways involved in emotional regulation, executive functioning, and self-referential processing. It has positive effects on mental health, as empirical evidence shows that it reduces stress, anxiety, and depression and enhances the quality of life. These findings are in line with the Buddhist faith that mindfulness brings an understanding of the interdependent, selfless experience, which ultimately brings an end to suffering. However, in secular therapy, mindfulness can be a device to alleviate symptoms, as it is often used for symptom management, not as a mechanism for real spiritual change(Wang, 2025).

e. Ethical Considerations

In Buddhism, mindfulness cannot be separated from ethics, wisdom, and compassion. Without these moral precepts, it is meaningless to be a Buddhist. In contrast, the current secular projects of mindfulness are often secular in nature, where a lot of effort is made to eliminate the moral or spiritual context of mindfulness from the form and background, which ultimately has a moral side to bring the material of its spiritual perspective to a broader audience. This decontextualization has raised doubts regarding the veracity of teaching mindfulness and of the authenticity and truth and has called into question the extent to which misinterpretation and appropriation could have occurred due to this approach in the media. Moreover, differences in teacher qualifications and instruction levels illustrate the need for ethical strength, particularly if these are secular. Reconciliation between accessibility and ethical footing is a particularly pertinent task for researchers and practitioners attempting to maintain the authentic value of mindfulness(Laine et al., 2025).

IV. DISCUSSION

a. Summary of Key Findings.

In this review, the significant similarities between classical Buddhist mindfulness and other psychological mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are highlighted. The two schools emphasize the present-moment mindfulness, and nonjudgmental mindfulness and consider the mindfulness to be an uninterrupted gaze at internal and external events. The other similarity of the two is that they are aimed at

establishing knowledge and relieving human suffering in the mind. Nevertheless, there are still large discrepancies. The Buddhist mindfulness is provided on the basis of ethical and values-infused conduct, proper judgment and wisdom. And more secular MBIs tend to deprive such moral and philosophical underpinnings and tend to pay more attention to alleviating the degree of stress, emotion regulation, and symptom management. Disidentification complicates the assessment of the ethical soundness of the modern mindfulness practices both in the clinical and non-clinical contexts. Meditation is everything and acquires various functions and spheres. In Buddhism meditation, which is an umbrella term that is employed to denote a number of practices through which spiritual liberation and enlightenment are tapped. Nevertheless, Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have been designed to enhance mental health and decrease the relapses of individuals who experience depression or anxiety (Furnell et al., 2023). The review can be defined as systematic, multidisciplinary, and is based on interdisciplinary understanding, relying on several research traditions. Still, the limitations of the present study are the differences between the quality of the study, the absence of clear definitions of mindfulness and conflicting approaches to the research that can influence the applicability of the results. And secularization of mindfulness creates challenges in making direct comparisons since most therapeutic adaptations, in practice, leave out key aspects of Buddhism and decrease the conceptual fit.

b. Studies and Real-Life Application

Aspects such as cross-cultural comparisons and integrations of mindfulness are insufficient in depth, requiring further understanding of cross-cultural integration of mindfulness. Hence, the study of long-term effect of mindfulness on brain activity, psychological welfare and spirituality will call for longitudinal research. Such a framework presents researchers with challenges of finding ways of improving quality and authenticity of MBIs from the ethical perspective. It is only when Mindfulness-based therapies, when including ethical concerns in their application, will yield a deep and transformative potential for all involved (i.e. the whole process), that their effectiveness can be ensured. It is important to manage the need for accessibility against its

authenticity. Essential principles need to be considered at the training and certification points for the teachers. Such cooperation between Buddhist scholars and clinical clinicians is essential to the progress towards more effective ways that acknowledge and respect different cultural and philosophic traditions and address modern therapeutic imperatives. Research may result in online teaching tools and courses that incorporate in a manner compatible with both classic and modern pedagogies (Haidar et al., 2024).

V. CONCLUSION

Buddhist mindfulness shares some similarities with, and sometimes differences from what we associate with its contemporary psychological adaptations. There are many non-sectarian MBIs available for application that can be adopted in a clinical setting; nevertheless, many overlook the ethical and philosophical framework deeply rooted in Buddhism. The next phase comprises interdisciplinary collaboration accompanied by thorough research to bring deeper understanding and more practice. Mindfulness is a living construct that represents a blend between spiritual practice and healing, and one that thus needs to be reconciled so that mindfulness can be incorporated into a secular health-conscious environment without dumbing down or losing its core. It was clear that to maintain the integrity of lessons drawn from mindfulness, modernity today, as before, needs to continue dialogue with the traditional teachings so that alterations do not make us poorer individually or lose the ethical basis for the change. Acknowledging and adapting mindfulness from Buddhist practices to secular practices is an active task of the current researchers. The future of mindfulness will be determined by this capacity for transformative use across different contexts, while honoring where it comes from.

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