

Mindfulness and Meditation in the East and the West

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Mindfulness and meditation have infiltrated the mainstream in the Western world in recent years, but mindfulness and meditation have been acknowledged and practiced for thousands of years. These concepts and practices have their roots in Eastern religions, primarily in Buddhism and Hinduism, but the modern Western mindfulness movement is largely secular and separated from these roots. Western mindfulness leaders, researchers, and advocates primarily present mindfulness and meditation as means to relieving stress and improving overall health and well-being. In contrast, mindfulness and meditation are traditionally practiced for religious and spiritual reasons in the Eastern world. Despite these differences, mindfulness and meditation around the world have been shaped by Eastern and Western influences. Furthermore, regardless of a person's initial intentions, practicing mindfulness and meditation can provide both secular and spiritual benefits.

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Process Analysis Statement

There has been a growing acceptance of mindfulness and meditation in the West recently, which can help to explain why an American college student like me has incorporated these practices into my daily life. I first learned about mindfulness, or awareness of the present moment, five years ago, and I have been meditating almost everyday since then in order to become more mindful. To meditate, I sit, close my eyes, and follow my breath, letting thoughts come and go. It is a simple process but not an easy one, and there are still days when I struggle to stay present and focused. Though meditation can seem tedious or uncomfortable at first, I have noticed so many positive changes in myself since I started meditating; I am more present and focused on the well-being of myself and those around me. I believe everyone can meditate and experience its many benefits, and spreading awareness of this life changing practice was a goal of mine in writing this paper.

Meditation has been a constant in my life for years now, but the intentions and results of my practice have evolved over time. Originally, I meditated for around 10 minutes a day as a way to manage stress and be more present. However, as I started devoting more time to meditation and gaining more experience, I have fostered an appreciation and interest in the spiritual side of the practices. Practicing meditation for spiritual reasons has been at the center of Buddhist and Hindu teachings for millennia. In opening my mind to the traditional aspects of mindfulness and meditation, I became curious about how these ideas and practices have spread from the East to the West and the changes that occurred along the way. This curiosity inspired me to do a research paper analyzing the similarities and differences between the modern Western mindfulness movement and the original mindfulness and meditation of the East.

I am lucky to have had access to the university library during this project; it is an excellent source for databases and books. A lot of my research was done online, and I primarily found articles on the PsycInfo database. Google Scholar was another helpful resource for finding academic articles to read and reference in my paper. In addition to online articles, I also read physical books; some of these were from Bracken Library, and others were books I already owned. I made an effort to include a balance of modern Western sources and historical Eastern sources in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of mindfulness and meditation throughout history and around the globe.

Completing this thesis was a growth experience, and I appreciate the new knowledge and understanding I have of this fascinating topic. It was also a challenging experience in many ways. This is the longest paper I have ever written, and it was difficult at times to stay motivated when there was not an exact time table or due date. I was overwhelmed sometimes by the vast amount of information out there to read and analyze. Still, I am proud of myself for finishing my thesis. It required a lot of time, energy, and focus, and I have learned that I have the ability to carry out and complete more advanced academic work. Though it was difficult, I am grateful to have had this opportunity to learn and grow.

Mindfulness and Meditation in the East and the West

Introduction

Meditation has been practiced in the Eastern world for millennia, but recently there is a growing interest in meditation and mindfulness in the West. According to Davis and Hayes (2011), “mindfulness” is a common term used to refer to “a psychological state of awareness.” The word mindfulness originated from the word “sati,” a word from the ancient Indian language Pali. “Sati” means “having awareness, attention, and remembering.” Other definitions of mindfulness include “moment-by-moment awareness” and “a state of psychological freedom that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, without attachment to any particular point of view” (Davis & Hayes, 2011, p. 198). Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts, defined mindfulness as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Mani et. al, 2015). There are many ways to increase one’s levels of mindfulness, such as yoga and tai chi, but the most commonly studied mindfulness activity is mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is the English term for Vipassana (a Pali word for “insight or clear awareness”); it is a meditation form derived from Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhist school that has remained the most unchanged from the original teachings of the Buddha (Brown & Engler, 1980). Psychologist and spiritual teacher Ram Dass described mindfulness meditation in simple terms: “Try following your breath, and any time any thought arises, notice it and then go back to the breath” (Netflix, 2017).

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced for a multitude of spiritual as well as secular reasons. Spiritual reasons behind mindfulness and meditation include practicing Buddhism or

Hinduism and reaching new levels of consciousness such as enlightenment (Tsering, 2005), and secular reasons include reducing stress, anxiety, and treating other mental ailments (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The intentions and practices of meditation differ throughout various cultures and geographic areas. There is a divide between meditation in the East, which is traditionally practiced for sacred reasons, and meditation in the West, which more commonly takes a secular approach (Carlson, 2018). There is a rich history of mindfulness and meditation in the East that can be traced back thousands of years (Tsering, 2003). The adoption of mindfulness and meditation in the West is a more recent phenomenon, flowing into the mainstream in the past couple decades (Purser, 2019). The common way of thinking in the modern Western world is predominantly based on facts and observable events, which can explain why Westerners more often practice meditation for secular reasons (Watts, 1968). Buddhism and Hinduism, some of the most practiced religions in the Eastern world, will be thoroughly discussed because of the religions foundation of mindfulness and meditation (McMahan, 2015). There are several distinctions between mindfulness and meditation on different sides of the globe, particularly in their histories and the intentions behind the practices, but traditional Eastern meditation and the Western mindfulness movement are undeniably interconnected and influenced by each other.

A Brief History of Mindfulness and Meditation in Eastern Religions

The increasing popularization and secularization of mindfulness and meditation around the world, especially in the Western world, is a main discussion point in this paper, but in order to acquire a cohesive understanding of the ideas and practices of mindfulness and meditation, it is essential to examine the Eastern roots and rich history behind the ideas and practices of mindfulness and meditation (Ditrich, 2016). Historically speaking, mindfulness and meditation

have been found first in religious contexts, particularly in Buddhism and Hinduism, and the spiritual intentions and benefits of mindfulness and meditation are found in examining these religions.

The earliest known records of mindfulness and meditation are from around 2,500 years ago and come from ancient Indian Buddhism, an ancient Eastern religion based on the purposes of “transcendence, awakening (bodhi), a profound transformation of human consciousness, reached through ethical and meditative training” (Ditrich, 2016). The practice of Buddhism began during a time in India when societal and economic changes shifted traditional life and ideas. This time period was characterized by the expansion of power of major kingdoms such as Kosala and Magadha, the development of new cities, and the emergence of new trading routes and thus a new class of traders (Ditrich, 2016). Since then, Buddhism has spread across the Indian subcontinent and most parts of Asia (Ditrich, 2016).

The Buddha is a universally known ancient figure who is accredited for many of the founding principles of Buddhism, so much so that the religion is named after him; thus, he and his life are widely studied by historians and other researchers of Buddhism and meditation. In *The Four Noble Truths: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*, Geshe Tashi Tsering, long time follower and teacher of Buddhism, wrote a historical overview of the life of the Buddha. Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha left his life of luxury as the prince Siddhartha in order to become an ascetic; this meant he purposely practiced extreme deprivation, including going without food, shelter, and clothes, in an effort to find truth. After six years of suffering and intense self-discipline, he reached enlightenment while sitting under the Bodhi tree next to the river Neranjara, and thus he became the Buddha, or the Awakened One. He did not tell anyone about his enlightenment until 49 days after his experience under the Bodhi tree, when he traveled to

Sarnath, a small town in Central India, to meet with his five companions that he sat with during his six years of asceticism. They were skeptical of the Buddha's story of enlightenment at first, but seeing his radiance inspired the ascetics to ask him to teach them how to attain enlightenment. The Buddha agreed to share his wisdom with his companions, which eventually spread to reach millions of people around the world.

The Buddha's first teaching was the four noble truths, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama describes the four noble truths as the blueprint of Buddhism; the four noble truths are: 1) the noble truth of suffering, 2) the noble truth of the origin of suffering, 3) the noble truth of the cessation of suffering and the origin of suffering, and 4) the noble truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering and the origin of suffering (Tsering, 2005). While the Buddha's first teaching, the four noble truths, covers doctrine, the Buddha's second teaching, the eightfold path, covers discipline; in *The Noble Eightfold Path*, Bhikku Bodhi explains that the eightfold path increases the accessibility of the teachings of the four noble truths by outlining the steps toward ending suffering and reaching enlightenment. The eightfold path consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Bodhi, 2012). The four noble truths and the eightfold path are the two principle teachings of Buddhism, and modern mindfulness and meditation were inherently shaped from these teachings of the Buddha.

Hinduism is another widely practiced Eastern religion rooted in meditation. Hinduism is a religion based around the practices and interconnectedness of spirituality, yoga, and meditation (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). The most holy book of Hinduism is the Vedas, and this text defines yoga as a "means of uniting the individual being with a higher being" (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Raja (meditative) yoga can be described as "a critical link to insight meditation" and "a

psychophysical method or a technique of training the mind and developing its subtle powers of perception to discover spiritual truths that provide the basis for religious principles and practices” (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). As is true in Buddhism, meditation is the most fundamental part of Hindu philosophy and spirituality, and yoga is traditionally practiced in order to prepare the body and enhance focus to achieve a deep meditative state (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). While both Buddhism and Hinduism are similar in that they have Eastern roots and center around meditation, Hindus aim to connect to the great wisdom and power of the atman (soul), which contrasts with the Buddhist vision of anatman (no-self) (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Another difference is that the form of meditation most practiced today more closely resembles Buddhist practices than Hindu practices (Ditrich, 2016). Still, both religions share the common goal of gaining spiritual insight through meditation and both have undeniably influenced modern Western practices of mindfulness and meditation (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). The next section will continue telling the history of mindfulness and meditation, covering how these Eastern religious ideas and practices have become popular in the West and the changes that have occurred in the process.

The Introduction of Mindfulness and Meditation to the West

Compared to the history of Eastern mindfulness and meditation, which dates back to ancient times and spans across millennia, mindfulness and meditation are still recent developments in the West. These practices were introduced to Westerners during the colonial period of Asia, which was approximately between the 1870s and 1950s. When Europeans had control over much of Asia during this time period, they began to embrace mindfulness (Ditrich, 2016). This can partly be attributed to the Romantic and Transcendentalist movements in Europe, which reached their peak roughly between 1800 and 1860, right before the colonial period of

Asia (Ditrich, 2016). The Romanticism movement is known for its defiance of convention, and Romantics in the 19th century began to challenge the Western perception that rationalism is the one legitimate path to discovering truth. They believed in the importance of the subjective inner experience of each individual, and they argued that feelings are not only a valid source of truth, but that perhaps senses and emotions can lead to higher levels of knowledge and wisdom than with empiricism alone (Ladd et al, 2010). Transcendentalists were inspired by romantics, and the two philosophies share many commonalities including a deep appreciation of nature, valuing the individual, and questioning the current society; however, Transcendentalism arguably went deeper into challenging the values and conformity of current times and seeing and believing in a vision of a new era (Goldman, 2019). Romanticism and Transcendentalism had a clear influence on Europe that led to a growing acceptance and acknowledgement of the existence of emotional and spiritual truth, opening the door for the introduction and spread of the traditional spiritual practices of mindfulness and meditation to the Western world.

Looking at the 2,500 year old history of mindfulness and meditation in the Eastern world, and then comparing it to the Western mindfulness movement, which did not experience significant growth or mainstream attention until the past few decades (Ditrich, 2016), one might assume that Westerners who practice mindfulness and meditation are simply imitating and adopting the traditions and rituals of old Eastern religions. However, Tamara Ditrich explains in her article about mindfulness and meditation in Eastern and Western history that while the East laid the foundation for mindfulness and meditation in the West, the Western World had a significant influence on Eastern mindfulness and meditation as well (Ditrich, 2016). The West was becoming rapidly modernized during the 19th century, and some Eastern and Western thinkers interpreted Buddhism as a way to rescue the Western world from the decaying role of

spirituality in their increasingly modern societies (McMahan, 2015). However, in order to successfully spread this “humanizing wisdom of the East” (McMahan, 2015), Buddhism had to take a new form that was more palatable to Westerners. This new form, known as Buddhist modernism, offered a more secular approach to Buddhism. Buddhist modernism adheres to the scientific, humanistic, and democratic ideals of Western society while de-emphasizing rituals and the supernatural (McMahan, 2015); it emphasizes texts, rationality, and most importantly, meditation, and it challenges the roles of dogma, ritual, and traditions in Buddhism and meditation. Much of the Buddhism practiced around the world today resembles and is influenced by the Buddhist modernism of the 19th century (McMahan, 2015). Therefore, the secularization of meditation as well as its growing popularity in the Western world can be traced back and largely attributed to the events of European colonialism in Asia and the simultaneous rise of the Romanticism and Transcendentalism movements in Europe, which resulted in a hybrid form of Buddhism that emphasizes both meditation and empiricism.

The Modern Western Mindfulness Movement

The history of mindfulness and meditation in the West began in the 19th century, but these ideas and practices did not reach the mainstream of Western culture until much later on; the popularity and acceptance of mindfulness and meditation in the West have grown significantly in the past few decades. Mindfulness and meditation used to be viewed as obscure Buddhist traditions by most Westerners, but mindfulness is now widely embraced by the Western psychotherapy community as an effective way to help clients manage mental health symptoms (Davis & Hayes, 2011). There are now departments of mindfulness at several major universities in the United States and Europe where top researchers gather to study mindfulness and teach

courses on mindfulness meditation as a way to combat the stress and anxiety faced by students and other people in the community. These university-funded mindfulness centers include the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (Oxford University, 2021), the Mindfulness Center at Brown (Brown University, 2021), and most famously, the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts (University of Massachusetts, n.d.). Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the UMass Stress Reduction clinic in the 1970s, and it has since developed into a center for Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Kabat-Zinn created MBSR in 1979; since then, this form of therapy has become widely practiced and studied around the world (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). MBSR has been the subject of many research projects, and it has inspired the emergence of other forms of therapy, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), a treatment method that has been shown by multiple studies to help prevent relapse in chronic depression (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). MBSR has been scientifically supported to improve physical and mental health (Greeson et. al, 2011), and some of these studies will be analyzed in a later section.

Carlson (2018), a clinical psychologist and practitioner of mindfulness-based interventions (including MBSR and MBCT), offers a few explanations for the expanding meditation movement in the West. These include an increasing number of researchers conducting neuroscientific studies on meditation, less skepticism and more acceptance of Buddhism among Westerners, and the potential of mindfulness as a treatment option for the growing number of people struggling with mental health issues. She also raises the point that the largest demographic of meditators in the modern Western world are wealthy, white women. Many leaders and researchers in the Western mindfulness movement are men, but most study participants, mindfulness instructors, and people who practice and study meditation in general are women. A 2017 review of 117 studies on MBSR or MBCT showed that less than 29 percent

of the 10,000 participants in the analysis were men (Carlson, 2018). One possibility Carlson proposed for the uneven gender distribution in studies of mindfulness-based interventions is that women have greater rates of depression and anxiety than men on average, and depression and anxiety are some of the most common conditions that MBSR and MBCT target (Carlson, 2018). Carlson argues that a reason for this gender disparity in mindfulness research could be that mindfulness activities like meditation and yoga are seen as feminine and “touchy-feely,” though this may change with Western society’s growing acceptance of different gender identities and a lessening pressure for people to fit into traditional gender roles (Carlson, 2018). This view of meditation as a feminine undertaking appears to be unique to the West. Buddhism, the religion historically tied to and largely based on meditation, is like most major religions in that the stories and teachings of Buddhism have primarily been told from a male perspective, and ever since Buddhism’s inception, women of the religion have felt pressure to prove that they are as capable of following the Buddha’s teachings as men are (Farrer-Halls, 2002).

Other demographics Carlson examined were race, income, and education level. She mentioned that the people who practice meditation in the West are predominantly white, and she found in her own research that 80% of the participants in her multiple studies were white. In addition, Western meditators on average are wealthier and more highly educated than most, which makes sense considering the cost of mindfulness resources like MBSR and MBCT programs and mindfulness retreats (Carlson, 2018), however there are a growing number of resources that are making mindfulness and meditation accessible to a larger audience.

The Emergence of Mindfulness and Meditation Apps

A somewhat recent development in the Western mindfulness movement is an emerging class of meditation apps. Over the past decade, there has been a concurrent rise in mental health issues and smartphone use; in 2015, 39% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 had used a smartphone to search for mental health information (Mani et. al, 2015). These apps show promise as a widely accessible source for learning how to meditate and improve well-being. To investigate the efficacy of mindfulness apps, Mani, Kavanagh, Hides, and Stoyanov (2015) conducted a systematic review of 23 mindfulness apps found in the iTunes store and Google Apps Marketplace. All of the apps contained guided meditations and mindfulness education, and almost all of them included breathing and body scan exercises. Headspace was rated the highest on the Mobile Application Rating Scale (MARS) (Kavanagh et. al, 2015), and this app will be further explored in this paragraph. Headspace ranked above the rest for reasons including its high quality graphics, straightforward interface, and interesting visuals and video guides to illustrate concepts of mindfulness and meditation (Kavanagh et. al, 2015). According to the Headspace website, the app was developed by a British man named Andy Puddicombe. While he was working on his degree in Sports Science in his early 20s, he decided to pursue a radically different path; Puddicome traveled to the Himalayas to study meditation. This experience inspired him to take a ten year journey around the world, and he eventually became a Tibetan Buddhist monk in Northern India. This background information about the founder of Headspace clarifies that the foundation of the practices and information on the app are in ancient Eastern practices.

Scientifically Supported Secular Benefits of Mindfulness and Meditation

The Western mindfulness movement advocates for the many benefits of mindfulness and meditation, and almost all of these are secular benefits. Some of these include enhanced awareness, better self-regulation, increased openness to and acceptance of new experiences, and the ability to gain new perspectives on given information (Mani et. al, 2015). Mindfulness has been linked to positive psychological, physical, behavioral, and interpersonal effects, such as “developing tolerance, acceptance, patience, trust, openness, gentleness, generosity, empathy, gratitude, and loving-kindness, each of which is relevant to the personal recovery of people with mental disorders, as well as to positive well-being in general” (Mani et. al, 2015). Findings show that mindfulness can reduce distress and improve life functioning in young people, and there is growing evidence for the capacity of mindfulness to reduce levels of depression and prevent relapses of depression (Mani et. al, 2015). The field of mindfulness is showing promise as an effective tool in psychotherapy, and the following studies provide examples of some of the secular benefits mindfulness and meditation can provide.

To investigate the effectiveness of mindfulness as a tool in psychotherapy, Davis and Hayes (2011) wrote a review of several studies on mindfulness and meditation. They found empirically supported benefits in three categories: affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal benefits. There is evidence that mindfulness aids in healthy emotion regulation; this affective change is largely set in motion by intrapersonal changes in cognition including metacognitive awareness, a decrease in rumination, and enhanced attention (Davis & Hayes, 2011). A study by Chambers, Lo, and Allen (2008) advanced the evidence that mindfulness and meditation can provide significant affective benefits. In their study, 20 participants who had no previous experience with meditation attended an intensive 10-day mindfulness meditation retreat. After

the retreat, they measured the participants' mindfulness, rumination, affect, and performance tasks. The results showed that participants who went to the retreat had significantly higher levels of mindfulness, decreases in negative affect and depressive symptoms, and they ruminated less than the control group (Chambers et. al, 2008). Their findings are consistent with several other studies. Charoensukmongkol's (2014) study investigated the link between mindfulness and emotional intelligence, general self-efficacy, and perceived stress. Charoensukmongkol posted a survey to several popular religious websites from Thailand; the survey consisted of asking people if they participate in mindfulness meditation in addition to questions about people's emotional states. After surveys were completed by 317 participants, of which 200 answered yes to practicing mindfulness meditation, it was found that mindfulness meditation was significantly correlated with higher scores of emotional intelligence and lower scores of perceived stress (Charoensukmongkol, 2014). Mindfulness meditation has also been linked to better sleep; one study examined the difference between the sleep quality of cancer patients, a population prone to experiencing sleep disturbances, before and after eight weeks of MBSR. At the end of the study, patients exhibited significant decreases in sleep disturbances and increased sleep quality (Carlson & Garland, 2005).

The previous paragraph outlined several of the intrapersonal benefits of mindfulness meditation can have on a person's affect and cognition, but its interpersonal benefits are just as abundant and relevant. Interpersonal development, which includes building and maintaining relationships and fostering empathy, has always been an integral component of mindfulness and meditation (Dekeyser et. al, 2008). In traditional Buddhism, one of the most important reasons to practice mindfulness and meditation is to grow beyond oneself to connect with others and the world (Yi, 2017). Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, and Dewulf used the Kentucky Inventory of

Mindfulness Skills (KIMS) along with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the Scale for Interpersonal Behavior (SIB), and a few other interpersonal scales to research the relationship between mindfulness and interpersonal skills such as expressing oneself, showing sensitivity and empathy for others, and better self-esteem. Hundreds of participants from a sample of undergraduate students as well as a sample of parents filled out the surveys, and the results from the analysis showed that all four factors of mindfulness covered in the KIMS (Observe, Describe, Act with Awareness, and Accept Without Judgment) were positively associated with expressing oneself in social situations (Dekeyser et. al, 2008). Greater scores in the mindful observation category were associated with higher levels of empathy, and the categories of mindful description, acting with awareness, and non-judgmental acceptance were all associated with less social anxiety, more body satisfaction, and better ability to express feelings (Dekeyser et. al, 2008). Other scientifically supported interpersonal benefits of mindfulness and meditation include more satisfaction in close relationships (Whitney & Chang, 2020), enhanced social connectedness (Hutcherson et. al, 2008), and increased altruism (Wallmark et. al, 2012).

Spiritual Components of Mindfulness and Meditation

A variety of secular benefits from mindfulness and meditation have been supported by numerous studies; however, some critics argue that researchers and advocates of the modern Western mindfulness movement are guilty of appropriating classical Buddhist traditions, translating them into secular practices, and missing out on the full benefits of mindfulness and meditation in the process (Farb, 2014). Kelly Yi explains in her article comparing mindfulness in clinical, spiritual, and religious contexts that practicing mindfulness for the primary purpose of benefiting oneself is at odds with the Buddha's teaching of mindfulness as an all-encompassing

state that expands beyond the self and into a deeper connection with others and the world. In the context of Buddhism, mindfulness was taught by the Buddha as a way to become spiritually liberated, end suffering, and enter a transcendent dimension known as nirvana, a plane of existence that is largely ignored, denied, and even pathologized by Western science and the secular mindfulness movement (Yi, 2017). Falb and Pargament (2014) discuss the spiritual benefits of mindfulness and meditation and their typical absence in mindfulness treatments in the West. First of all, they define spirituality in terms of four qualities: “transcendence, the sense that an object or experience goes beyond our everyday, usual, or ordinary understanding; boundlessness, a sense of vast, unrestricted space and time; ultimacy, that which is the primary, fundamental, or underlying essence of all experience; and interconnectedness, a sense of dissolving boundaries around the self and increasing unity with others and the world.” They propose an explanation for the tendency to neglect the spiritual side of mindfulness and meditation in the West; the non-theistic nature of Buddhism makes it easy to separate the practices of mindfulness and meditation from their traditional religious contexts and appropriate them to create more accessible programs and treatment plans for Westerners (Falb & Pargament, 2014). Nonetheless, they cite multiple studies that suggest that the efficacy of mindfulness and meditation treatments can be partly explained by the spiritual aspects of mindfulness and meditation, and that placing more emphasis on spirituality could increase the effectiveness of these treatments (Falb & Pargament, 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence showing that practicing mindfulness and meditation can increase acceptance, feelings, and experiences of spirituality (Isgett et. al, 2016), which will be further explained in a later paragraph.

Differences between Eastern and Western Mindfulness Meditation Intentions

As explained in the previous paragraphs, there are many secular as well as spiritual benefits of mindfulness and meditation. While Easterners have traditionally meditated for spiritual reasons, primarily in Buddhist and Hindu contexts, Westerners often see meditation as a way to resolve mental health issues such as stress and anxiety. A few more scientifically supported secular benefits of meditation include lower blood pressure, lower cortisol, and enhanced attention and emotional regulation; however, to the people who practice mindfulness and meditation for traditional reasons, these objective physical and mental benefits are secondary gains compared to their aim for spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment (Buttle, 2015). The different intentions of most Westerners who practice meditation can be explained by two crucial elements of the West: 1) science and its influence on Western society, and 2) the modern Western model of psychology.

Since the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe, the expansion of science has played a significant role in the development of Western civilization. The introduction of the scientific method of thinking has had implications for society as a whole, and this includes the decline of attendance of religious services in the West (Dhima & Golder, 2020). For the first time ever, church membership in the United States is below 50%; this means that the majority of Americans today are not affiliated with any church (Jones, 2021). This religious decline has largely diminished the perception that mysticism and the supernatural are credible sources of knowledge and understanding. With the rise of behaviorism in the mid-20th century along with advances in neuroscience over the past few decades, the field of psychology in the West has become more rooted in the scientific method. Alternatively, mysticism and the supernatural remain paramount to meditation in the East.

Mysticism, defined as “a doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation or ecstasy” (Dictionary.com), is largely incompatible with Western thought, which in modern times is rooted in science and logic. This can lead Western thinkers who lead with logic to discount mysticism and spirituality as a whole.

Almost all the classical literature on mysticism is vague, not only in describing the experience, but also in showing rational connections between the experience itself and the various traditional methods recommended to induce it- fasting, concentration, breathing exercises, prayers, incantations, and dances. A traditional master of Zen or Yoga, when asked why such-and-such practices lead or predispose one to the mystical experience, always responds, "This is the way my teacher gave it to me. This is the way I found out. If you're seriously interested, try it for yourself." This answer hardly satisfies an impertinent, scientifically-minded, and intellectually curious Westerner” (Watts, 1968).

While there is growing acceptance and praise of the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness in the West, the Western mindfulness movement has received some criticism for its secularity and disconnect from its traditional Eastern roots and intentions. Buddhist Monk Bhikku Bodhi argues that:

The great spiritual traditions themselves do not propose their disciplines as independent techniques that may be excised from their setting and freely recombined to enhance the felt quality of our lives. They present them, rather, as parts of an integral whole, of a coherent vision regarding the fundamental nature of reality and the final goal of the spiritual quest (Bodhi, 2012).

Mindfulness in the modern Western world is indeed often separated from its traditional, spiritual roots, and instead of acknowledging it as one part of a deeper spiritual journey, mindfulness often stands alone in the West. “Mindfulness” is the commonly spoken Western translation of the Hindu concept of *sati*, which essentially means present-moment awareness. “Mindfulness” was not a word until English Buddhist scholar T. W. Rhys Davids coined the term in the early 20th century (Lomas, 2016). Carlson (2018) described the term mindfulness as “simple and modern,” in contrast to meditation, which is often perceived by Westerners to be “old-fashioned, cultish, and difficult” (Carlson, 2018). Ronald E. Purser coined the term “McMindfulness” in 2019 to describe the secularized and commercialized modern Western mindfulness movement. In his book *McMindfulness*, he examines the modern Western mindfulness movement and how its promoters spread and market mindfulness. Purser argues that while these mindfulness advocates may have the intention of making positive change in individuals and society, there is a problem with the version of mindfulness they are promoting. Mindfulness has been commodified in the Western world, and it is now a \$4 billion industry; there are over 100,000 books for sale on Amazon that feature the word “mindfulness” in the title (Purser, 2019). Purser contends that based on the teachings of most mindfulness practitioners and advocates,

Mindfulness is nothing more than basic concentration training. Although derived from Buddhism, it’s been stripped of the teachings on ethics that accompanied it, as well as the liberating aim of dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings . . . Mindfulness is sold and marketed as a vehicle for personal gain and gratification. Self-optimization is the name of the game (Purser, 2019).

Eastern and Western Views of Self

“The most conspicuous difference between Buddhism and Western psychology is perhaps found in their respective treatments of the concept of “self.” In Western psychology, the existence of a “self” is generally affirmed. Buddhism denies the existence of an enduring “self” and substitutes instead the concept of anatman, ‘no-self’” (Jung, 1949). As indicated by this quote, one of the most fundamental differences in Eastern and Western spirituality is the conception of the self. Many Eastern terms mentioned in this paper lose some of their meaning in translation to Western culture, including the word “mindfulness” itself, as discussed previously. An example of this loss in translation in discussing self is the term “ego,” which takes on a completely different meaning in Western psychology compared to in Eastern meditation. In the West, ego is a Freudian term used to define one’s self-concept and individuality (Epstein, 1988). Despite mindfulness and meditation being predominantly practiced for mental health and other secular purposes in the West, Mark Epstein points out in his article “The Deconstruction of the Self: Ego and ‘Egolessness in Buddhist Insight Meditation’” that for some Western meditators, egolessness, or letting go of the self, is seen as a goal as well. Carl Jung believed that people must sacrifice their ego, which he described as a false idea of who we are, in order to reach a new level of consciousness and the realization of the true, transpersonal self (Rindfleish, 2007). Carter Phipps recognizes that the use of the word ego to refer to the self is relatively new to the English language, but he asserts that the concept of the ego, namely separation from the ego, is as old as enlightenment teachings themselves (Phipps, 2001).

Just about every major enlightenment teaching in the world has long held that the highest goal of spiritual and indeed human life lies in the renunciation, rejection and, ultimately, the death of the need to hold on to a separate, self-centered existence (Phipps, 2001).

Being able to separate from the self is seen as an honorable and worthwhile goal for some meditators in the West, but Epstein claims that in reality, egolessness has a more subtle and complex meaning that is often incomprehensible to Westerners. He explains that “meditation can be seen as operating in different ways on many distinctive facets of the ego, promoting change and development within the ego, rather than beyond it” (Epstein, 1988). One cannot simply break away from the ego; according to Buddhist thought, ego has a role in reaching higher levels of consciousness through meditation. This lies in the different inherent meanings of ego and self in Eastern Buddhism and the Western world. The Eastern view of ego is not of a solid and persisting self, but instead of a self that is elusive and ever changing; this view of self is roughly what is meant by “anatman,” or no self, and this state can be achieved through meditation (Epstein, 1988). Essentially, Epstein’s argument is that based on the Eastern conceptualization of ego, the state of egolessness is not the elimination of the self in deep meditation, but instead it is the revelation that the self as Westerners know it was never an existing entity in the first place (Epstein, 1988).

One explanation for the difference between Eastern and Western views of self is the commonly discussed distinction between collectivism in Eastern countries and individualism in Western countries. In collectivist Eastern countries, it is customary to put the group before oneself and to focus little attention on being a unique individual; conversely, in individualistic Western countries, people are viewed as being distinct from each other, and individuality and uniqueness are valued (Martin, 2018). These two cultural models demonstrate a fundamental disconnect between Eastern and Western views of the self. Throughout Western history, individualism has shaped the conception of the self (Martin, 2018). In his book *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (1992), Dumont explores the

origins of individualism, which focuses on a person's unique self, in Western culture. He proposes that individualism has Judeo-Christian roots, but the concept could date back to Ancient Greece, when men formed and discussed their own ideas and thus saw themselves as individuals. Plato and Aristotle emphasized self-sufficiency as a crucial element of a functioning society, and these famous ancient philosophers focused on a person's rational mind (Dumont, 1992). In addition, Descartes argued "I think therefore I am," as well as for the idea of dualism between mind and body (Martin, 2018), and even after millennia, most Westerners still see themselves as independent people shaped by their own thoughts and perceptions (Dumont, 1992). In contrast, the Buddha rejected the concept of self. Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula explained that "according to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine,' selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilement" (Rahula, 1996). Explained further, not only did the Buddha dismiss the conception of self, he also attributed many of the ills of the world to it (Rahula, 1996). Anatman (not-self) is essential to the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment, which is centered around losing attachment from personal desires and surrendering to a state of oneness with everyone and everything (Epstein, 1988).

The Buddhist view of denying the self is foreign and difficult to grasp for Westerners. Western civilization is founded on the Judeo-Christian view of the world, and Western cultures are highly individualistic, so therefore, the concept of self is almost universally accepted and unquestioned, although the teachings of Christianity do emphasize selflessness and self-sacrifice, as evidenced by several Bible verses. For example: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Hebrews 13:16), and "Walk in the way of

love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). Despite the Bible’s emphasis on sacrificing oneself for God and for others, the existence of self is still seen as essential. Dumont also contends that individualism was present in the first Christians, and a fundamental teaching of Jesus Christ was that man is an “individual-in-comparison-to-God” (Dumont, 1992). Christians separate themselves from and place themselves below God, but Buddhists believe that one can be the Buddha himself by reaching the state of anatman. In examining Christianity and Buddhism, “No Christian would say, ‘I am Jesus,’ but Buddhists would say, ‘Thou art Buddha’” (Jung, 1949). The differences listed above have led to a misunderstanding of the original purposes of mindfulness and meditation in the West, and even pathology of spiritual experiences that can arise from these practices, which will be further discussed in the next paragraph.

Pathology of Spiritual Experiences in the West

Some studies have found empirical evidence for the link between mindfulness and spirituality, but the legitimacy of spiritual experiences brought about by mindfulness and meditation are still questioned in the West. Disparate views of the self between Eastern and Western traditions also leads to contrasting evaluations of transcendence – or moving beyond the self. In Buddhism, the ultimate goal in life is to reach enlightenment, a transcendental state of bliss characterized by losing attachment to one’s self and desires. In contrast with the desirability and acceptance of reaching enlightenment in Buddhism, enlightenment and other mystical experiences are pathologized in the West as psychosis. Ram Dass, one of the most influential people to bridge Eastern and Western spirituality, wrote a page in his bestselling book *Be Here*

Now about the way Western psychology pathologizes spiritual experiences, including reaching enlightenment. He disclosed that:

I've been with well over 100 people who have had such an experience which was so powerful and valid but it was so discontinuous with their normal consciousness that they screamed for help. The help that was available to him was a group of minds which said 'That's alright, you've just gone crazy,' that is, "The experience you've just had is the experience of psychosis.'

(Dass, 1971)

In their article entitled "Religion, Spirituality, and Psychosis," Menezes and Moreira-Almeida (2010) identify that the DSM-IV began to categorize some spiritual and religious experiences as mental disorders with a diagnosis called "Religious or Spiritual Problem." The DSM-IV and the DSM-5, the latter being the most recent version of the diagnostic manual published by the American Psychiatric Association, both include the diagnosis of "Religious or Spiritual Problem." The DSM-5 outlines the criteria for this diagnosis as follows:

This category can be used when the focus of clinical attention is a religious or spiritual problem. Examples include distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution.

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Menezes and Moreira-Almeida argue in their article that though some spiritual encounters can present themselves as psychotic episodes, many of these experiences are non pathological, genuine manifestations of spiritual and religious experiences. Some argue that the

“Religious or Spiritual Problem” diagnosis may be culturally insensitive, and its inclusion in the DSM requires deeper examination. Lukoff (1998) discussed the addition of this category to the DSM-IV, and he explained the ethics and importance of psychologists approaching this diagnosis with sensitivity and open-mindedness to different cultures and religions.

According to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 1992), psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be aware of social and cultural factors which may affect assessment and treatment (Canter, Bennet, Jones, & Nagy, 1994). Since the religious and spiritual dimensions of culture are among the most important factors that structure human experience, beliefs, values, behaviors as well as illness patterns (James 1958; Krippner & Welch, 1992), sensitivity to religious and spiritual issues is an important part of the cultural diversity of competence of psychologists (Lukoff, 1998).

Lukoff acknowledges that intensive meditation can lead to some effects that may be distressing, such as dissociation, depersonalization, and altered perceptions, and these effects have been documented in traditional Eastern and modern Western meditators alike, but he goes on to say that these experiences are prevalent and considered normal in many cultures and religions, and therefore should not be pathologized as Depersonalization Disorder or similar diagnoses (Lukoff, 1998).

Despite the continual growth of the Western mindfulness movement, the widespread culture of the Western world believes that the normal, non-meditative state of consciousness is good enough, and even ideal (Menezes, A. & Moreira-Almeida, A., 2010). There is a common tendency for Western practitioners to make sense of spiritual experiences such as enlightenment by labeling them as psychosis, which paints a negative image of the Eastern religious intentions

of meditation in the West, especially considering the persisting stigmatization of mental illness. The pathology of spiritual experiences has contributed to the separation of Western mindfulness and meditation from its Eastern roots.

Mindfulness and Meditation as a Path to Enhanced Spirituality

This paper has examined many differences between how mindfulness and meditation are interpreted and practiced in the Eastern versus the Western world, and it has explored the dichotomy of the secular approach of the West and the spiritual approach of the East. However, some scientific studies have found that practicing mindfulness and meditation, even in secular settings, can increase levels of spirituality and open-mindedness to spirituality (Isgett et. al, 2016). Research has also demonstrated that Westerners who practice meditation regularly are more likely to view the self as it is often conceptualized in the East - transcendent, idealized, and interconnected; the participants also reported higher levels of nonattachment, compassion, and spiritual satisfaction after practicing meditation (Martin, 2018). Certain neurotransmitters have been linked to spirituality, and increasing these neurotransmitters can lead to a heightened sense of spirituality, and these neurochemical changes often occur as a result of meditation. Isgett, Frederickson, Van Cappelen, and Way (2016) were first to discover a significant link between oxytocin and spirituality. Oxytocin is a hormone that is primarily known for its role in the birthing process, but it also acts as a neurotransmitter to create feelings of love, happiness, and trust (Erdman, 2021). Isgett et. al assigned one group to receive intranasal oxytocin and the other group to receive a placebo. The results showed that the group who received the oxytocin treatment reported increased spirituality. Furthermore, this effect remained significant up to a week after the participants were exposed to oxytocin (Isgett, 2016). Spanish researchers found

increased levels of salivary oxytocin in a group of college students who had just practiced a brief mindfulness session in comparison to the control group (Bellosta-Batalla, 2020). In her research on oxytocin and the microbiome, Susan Erdman (2021) confirmed that oxytocin is associated with enhanced spiritual well-being, which is best recognized during meditation, though the link is still not fully understood (Erdman, 2021).

To study the connections between mindfulness, spirituality, and health outcomes, 44 participants in the UMass MBSR program were assessed on their levels of mindfulness and spirituality using the Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale, the Toronto Mindfulness Scale, and a Spiritual Well-Being Scale before and after they participated in the MBSR program (Carmody et. al, 2008). After the program, the participants showed significant improvements in all areas measured – spirituality, mindfulness, and physical and psychological symptoms. Increases in mindfulness were associated with increased spirituality, and increases in mindfulness and spirituality were both associated with reduced psychological distress and medical symptoms (Carmody et. al, 2008). Greeson et al. (2011) also used surveys to assess participants before and after they participated in an eight-week MBSR program, and they found that changes in spirituality and mindfulness were both significantly linked to improvement in mental health. Their findings suggest that enhanced spiritual experiences following MBSR can partially explain positive mental health outcomes (Greeson et. al, 2011). Both studies found significant links to mindfulness, spirituality, and improvements in well-being, and these consistent results indicate that the secular and spiritual intentions and benefits are not necessarily mutually exclusive; mindfulness and meditation can help people achieve secular goals such as enhanced physical and mental health while also leading to increased spirituality, which along with mindfulness is also linked to better health outcomes (Greeson et. al, 2011).

Bridging the Gap Between Eastern and Western Meditation and Spirituality

While there are many differences between the Eastern and Western meditation, “Fruitful dialogue need not rely on shared beliefs and practices, but on the shared human condition,” Meckel contended in *Self and Liberation* (1992), a book comparing the dialogue between Buddhism and Western psychoanalysis. Meditating for spiritual reasons in the East and for secular reasons in the West both share an overarching goal of finding meaning and fostering hope from suffering. Meditating for spiritual reasons also leads to better mental health outcomes. Most studies have shown that participation and engagement in religion and/or spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including living a longer life, developing coping skills, and less anxiety, depression and suicide (Mohandas, 2008).

The scientific link of mindfulness and meditation to enhanced spirituality has not been extensively researched, as most research on mindfulness and meditation focuses on the secular aspects of the practices, which usually entails evaluating their efficacy in psychotherapy. However, the acknowledgment and analysis of the possibility for secularity and spirituality to co-exist in mindfulness and meditation is not a novel concept. There are some notable figures who have devoted themselves to work in bridging the gap between Eastern and Western spirituality and meditation. Western psychologists Carl Jung (Meckel, 1992) and Ram Dass (Netflix, 2017) are often credited for introducing these once unfamiliar and foreign concepts of mindfulness and meditation to the Western world, which eventually resulted in the widespread knowledge and acceptance of Eastern spirituality and meditation practices in the West.

Carl Jung was a highly prominent and influential 20th century psychologist and thought leader. Academic R.C. Zaehner, famous for his historical study of Eastern religions, praised Jung

for doing “more to interpret Eastern religion than any other man” (Meckel, 1992, pg. 1). Wan, Johnson, and Templeton (2002) dissected the works of Jung and other Western psychologists and compared and contrasted them with those of Chinese educators, whose understandings maintain their roots in traditional Eastern religions including Buddhism, as a method for explaining the gaps but also the bridge between Eastern and Western approaches and philosophies. The first Western psychologists they covered were Jung and Freud, founding fathers of the psychoanalytic movement who shared a belief and interest in the unconscious (Rybak et. al, 2002). Freud’s view of the unconscious focused on the ego, which in this context refers to an individual’s natural and unrepressed self, and its conflicts with societal expectations. On the other hand, Jung took a collective approach by seeing the unconscious as going beyond the self (Rybak et. al, 2002). He theorized that there is a collective unconscious, defined as the sum of all mental capabilities made possible throughout human evolution, and that people undergo individuation, which means people are shaped into individuals based on their personal experiences with the collective unconscious (Rybak et. al, 2002). Recalling that Western cultures are predominately individualistic and Eastern cultures are traditionally collectivist (Martin, 2018), Jung’s perception of the unconscious as a collective experience demonstrates the influence Eastern cultures had on his philosophies. At the same time, he shows that he upholds the Western background in some cases, such as his belief in the value of the individual and its separation from the rest of the world (Rybak et. al, 2002). Because of his acceptance and consideration of both Eastern and Western schools of thought, Jung was a successful force in bridging the philosophies and spirituality of the East and the West.

Other psychologists who can be given some credit in transferring Eastern religion and practices to the West are Ram Dass and his fellow researchers of spiritual experiences. His given

name was Richard Alpert; Ram Dass means “servant of God,” and was called that name by a Hindu mystic named Neem Karoli Baba during his trip to India in 1967 (Dass, 1971). Ram Dass was a Harvard professor, but he was also a significant leader in the American counterculture of the 1960s. He and his contemporary Timothy Leary were arguably the most passionate, outspoken, and well-known advocates for the use of psychedelic drugs and their ability to evoke spiritual discovery and growth. Don Lattin (2010) recounts the story of “The Harvard Psychedelic Club,” a group of intellectuals who devoted much of their lives to studying psychedelic drugs; the members were Ram Dass, Leary, MIT philosophy professor Huston Smith, and Harvard M.D. Andrew Weils, who was a well-known proponent of holistic health (Lattin, 2010). Lattin points out that

These men were all career-driven, linear-thinking intellectuals before their consciousness-expanding encounters with psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, and other psychedelic drugs. After the ecstasy, they all turned from intellect to intuition, from mechanistic thinking to mysticism, from the scholarly to the spiritual, from the scientific to the shamanic (Lattin, 2010).

Their descriptions of their newfound spirituality largely encompass the experiences and ideas of Eastern religions, and Leary’s bestselling book *The Psychedelic Experience*, a guidebook for how to prepare for and experience beneficial psychedelic trips, is also *A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In his book, Leary discusses how he and his colleagues combined ancient Eastern Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques with the novel psychedelic drugs of the Western world to broaden their spiritual consciousness, and he speaks on Buddhist experiences including ego death and enlightenment (Leary, 1964). The fact that all the members of the Harvard Psychedelic Club had earned doctoral degrees and worked as professors and

researchers at some of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country gave them credibility as being experts in their fields (Lattin, 2010), and it is undeniable that these men played a significant role in introducing Eastern spirituality and philosophies to the Western world.

Conclusion

Several significant differences exist between mindfulness and meditation in the Eastern and Western worlds, but there is also a noticeable overlap that cannot be ignored while studying the rich history of Eastern mindfulness and meditation and its arrival to the Western world over the past couple centuries. Mindfulness and meditation in the West are inherently based on and inspired by the ancient practices of the Eastern world, but modern practices of mindfulness and meditation in the East have been influenced by the Western world as well. Today, the most common approach to mindfulness meditation for Easterners and Westerners alike most closely resembles Buddhist Modernism, the hybrid form of Buddhism that emerged during the 19th century, when much of Asia was under European control. Buddhist Modernism is influenced by both Eastern and Western philosophies, and centers on mindfulness meditation. Versus the Buddhism of past millennia, this newer form places more emphasis on science and empiricism and is less concerned with dogma and tradition (McMahan, 2015).

Today, 99% of the followers of Buddhism and Hinduism, the two religions credited to and characterized by mindfulness and meditation, live in Asia, and less than 1% live in the Western world (Starr, 2019); this furthers that the Western mindfulness movement is predominantly secular in nature. Most studies of mindfulness in the West have focused on the psychotherapeutic benefits, and MBSR and MBCT are well-known and widely accepted

treatment methods in Western medicine and psychology (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). There are many scientifically supported benefits of mindfulness and meditation, including enhanced attention, better emotional regulation (Buttle, 2015), and improved sleep (Carlson, 2018), to name a few. Nonetheless, secularity and spirituality do not have to be mutually exclusive in mindfulness and meditation. In fact, multiple studies have shown that mindfulness can improve health and well-being and build a heightened sense of spirituality; spirituality has also independently been correlated with health and well-being. Meditators who practice for primarily spiritual reasons still reap the secular benefits such as improved focus and mental health, and meanwhile, meditating for secular reasons can lead to enhanced openness to and experiences of spirituality (Greeson et. al, 2011. In studying the rich history of Buddhism and Hinduism along with modern scientific research, it is evident that valuable benefits and insights from mindfulness and meditation can be gained from spiritual traditions and secular practices alike.

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