

Religious and Secular Understanding of the Concept of Mindfulness – A Comparative Study

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Religious and Secular Understanding of the Concept of Mindfulness – A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this research article is to compare, characterize, investigate, and examine how mindfulness is viewed and practised in various religious contexts (such as in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity) as well as in secular contexts (such as in the clinical psychological fields and in the psycho-therapeutic interventions). This is to find key concepts, practices, and various interpretations of mindfulness in both religious and secular settings.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In this Comparative study, though we can use mixed methods to have a more holistic understanding of various conceptions of mindfulness used in religious as well as secular contexts, however, here the researcher focuses only on qualitative data by analyzing religious texts on mindfulness and the literature related to it from the scholarly sources. Hence, the data collection methods used here are data collected from secondary sample sources like academic journals, books, and other reliable sources, to explore the meaning and cultural contexts associated with mindfulness practices within the religious traditions and secular fields.

Finding/Result: After analysing the concept of mindfulness in this comparative study, it is found that there exists a difference between the religious and secular understanding of mindfulness. Though the differences are not major ones, we can find some changes in the definition, goals, practices cultural context, faith etc.

Originality/Value: This comparative study offers a nuanced understanding of how mindfulness practices can be interpreted, applied, and appreciated across different disciplines. Thus, it explores the significance of mindfulness both in religious and secular contexts. This will enable us to check the practicality of mindfulness and to show how effective a tool it is to reduce stress and other related problems.

Paper Type: Comparative Study Article.

Key Words: Mindfulness, Religious Mindfulness, Secular Mindfulness, Comparative Study.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The human mind has a thinking capacity, and it has always been fascinated with day-to-day human life experiences. It shows how one's mind makes desirable changes in one's life. Indian philosophy focuses heavily on the power of the human mind. Similarly, Oriental philosophy stresses that a person can control his or her mind which leads them to overall well-being. It shows that a person is characterized by one's mind (N. Gayathri & K. Meenakshi, 2012) [1]. The power of mind is very much linked with the concept of 'mindfulness'. Therefore, the idea of mindfulness has become increasingly popular as a means of enhancing awareness, capacity to withstand difficulties, and overall well-being in the present world which is becoming faster and more stressful. Although the concept of mindfulness originated in ancient religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, it has gone through a significant process of secularisation and has found its way into a variety of modern secular contexts like psychology, medicine, education etc. This secularisation has resulted in a curious discussion on mindfulness with its parallels and differences between secular and religious perspectives.

This study seeks to investigate and compare the understanding and practice of mindfulness in both religious and secular settings. By looking into the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of mindfulness, we hope to offer an insight into the fact that mindfulness is accepted as a transforming practice in various religious traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity and which has been carried down to the different secular contexts as effective therapeutical methods like in psychology, for instance, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Hence, the methodology used in this regard is a qualitative comparative study with an inductive approach.

In this paper, by conducting a comparative study, we hope to reveal the rich complexities and profound insights hidden in both religious and secular perspectives on the concept of mindfulness. In fact, this inquiry proposed to have an improved awareness of mindfulness as a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends cultural, spiritual, and disciplinary barriers, having the potentiality to interweave both theory and practice, improving our collective understanding of how mindfulness can be used to promote well-being in an increasingly complex world.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- (1) To answer the fundamental questions: how do religious traditions conceptualise and practise mindfulness? Whether the secular approaches to mindfulness differ or align with a religious understanding of the same?
- (2) To explore how the various religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity etc. approach and practise mindfulness.
- (3) To examine secular approaches to mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and cognitive therapy (MBCT) by analysing their similarities and differences with religious perspectives.
- (4) To develop a comprehensive grasp of mindfulness across cultures, spiritualities, and disciplines.
- (5) To enrich our understanding of mindfulness's potential to promote well-being and to find meaning in life through theoretical and practical applications.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE/ RELATED WORKS:

3.1. Mindfulness:

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully present and engaged in the moment without judgement, feeling bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment. It is often cultivated through meditation and improves focus and emotional regulation by reducing stress (Donald & D. I. A. N. E., 2010) [2]. The hallmark of mindfulness is present-moment awareness. Thinking about the past or the future all the time is a waste of mental energy and takes away from the advantages of living in the present. Hence, "here and now" is important for enjoying inner peace and reducing stress. (Veylanswami, 2019) [3]. Therefore, Mindfulness is the essence of appreciating life in the present without judgment. When a person becomes attentive, he or she becomes aware and begins to focus on his or her mission (Vidya Sagar, 2024) [4].

3.2. Religious Understanding of Mindfulness:

Religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. emphasize mindfulness to promote their spiritual practices in tune with their teachings. We can also observe that religions advocate mindfulness for a peaceful life among their devotees as it helps them live and cultivate awareness for spiritual growth. Examining mindfulness practices' conception, instruction, and application in various religious traditions and spiritual frameworks is a key component of a comparative study of mindfulness across faiths. This kind of research looks at how different religious traditions have different intellectual underpinnings, approaches, and results regarding mindfulness.

3.2.1. The Concept of Mindfulness in Hinduism:

The world's oldest religion, Hinduism, has practised meditation as long as it has existed. According to Hindu literature, "all persons are spiritual beings who derive from a tremendous spiritual source known as Brahman. When humans are cut off from this Divine source, they lose their true spiritual essence, like how sparks of fire go out when cut off from fire." (Allard, 2021) [5]. Thus, in Hinduism, meditation is employed to be at peace to reach their innate divine nature (Allard, 2021) [6]. Hinduism frequently links mindfulness to exercises like yoga, meditation, and developing an awareness of the present moment. These techniques are meant to promote inner calm, quiet the mind, and strengthen one's bond with the cosmos and oneself (Yogendra, 2023) [7]. Yoga has its roots in Hinduism, and it stresses the connection between body and mind through breath control, and present-focused awareness, frequently around breath observation. When persons who did integrative yoga compared to those who practised yoga as a physical activity, their cortisol levels dropped by about 31%. According to this study, higher results may result from doing yoga to incorporating it into one's spiritual practice. Hinduism views mindfulness as a holistic practice that includes not just mental wellness but also physical well-being, emotional stability, and spiritual development. This integrated approach aligns with contemporary notions of mindfulness as a comprehensive practice encompassing several dimensions of the human experience (Khanna & Greeson, 2013) [8].

3.2.2. The Concept of Mindfulness in Buddhism

Buddha considers mindfulness as "the path to enlightenment". Consciousness of one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and surroundings in the present moment without judgment plays a key role in the Buddhist concept of mindfulness (PHÚC, 2021) [9]. Academic fields such as psychology and neuroscience have expressed great interest in Buddhism's notion of mindfulness. Researchers have conducted a great deal of study on the advantages of mindfulness meditation for stress reduction, mental health, and cognitive function. This has aided in the integration of Buddhist ideas into therapeutic modalities (Keng et al., 2011) [10]. Thomas William Rhys Davids observes that the first step towards enlightenment is mindfulness which is "bringing attention and awareness to the present" which is also known as *Sati* in Buddhism (Allard, 2021) [11].

The path to enlightenment is eightfold. The book on Buddhism in India outlines the noble eightfold path with eight key components: right understanding of the theory, action, speech, intention, livelihood, mindfulness, right effort, and concentration (Warder, 2004) [12]. Similarly, the concept of mindfulness in the Indian context is when a person has a particular disposition towards an object, they become attached to it. However, once they let go of attachment and its underlying disposition, the object no longer evokes those feelings (Waldron, 2019) [13]. The growing appeal of secular Buddhism is due to its focus on the practical aspects of Buddhist teaching rather than religious or metaphysical beliefs. This approach often concentrates on mindfulness meditation and psychological insight from Buddhist practice (Brown, 2016) [14]. As interfaith dialogue becomes more widespread, Buddhists and followers of other religions engage in conversations that explore common values and ethical concepts, aiming to promote mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation among diverse religious communities (Andrabi, 2020) [15]. Thus, in Buddhism to attain enlightenment one has to attain mindfulness through the noble eightfold path.

3.2.3. The Concept of Mindfulness in Christianity

In Buddhism, mindfulness reveals the intrinsic 'Buddha nature' in all beings, while in Christianity, it fosters a divine connection with God through Jesus Christ. Both practices aim to achieve spiritual transcendence and deeper understanding (Trammel, 2017) [16]. Further, Trammel's study investigates how Christian mindfulness intervention, delivered through MP3 audio Recordings, can affect mindfulness and perceived stress. The goal of this intervention, according to Trammel, is to enhance mental health by combining Christian spirituality with mindfulness practices (Trammel, 2018) [17]. In Christianity, the foundation of prayer, mindfulness, and contemplation lies in simplicity. Hence, in the Christian tradition, this concept of simplicity is often described as a spiritual journey which is metaphorically termed as 'entering into a desert experience' of silence and contemplation. This

experience of silence is rich in meaning. To attain this experience, we should be open, and non-judgmental about our feelings, thoughts etc. (Tyler, 2018) [18]. The history of Christian mindfulness is exposed through various eminent Christian thinkers and writers. For instance the contemplative practices like St. John Climacus's "Ladder of Divine Ascent" (Zecher, 2015) [19]; Teresa of Avila's "The Internal Castel" (Grieb, 2005) [20]; St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* (Mayer, 1997) [21]; the Ignatian spiritual exercises (O'Brien, 2011) [21]; Jean-Pierre de Caussade's *Sacrament of the Present Moment* (De Caussade, 2011) [22], Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Lawrence, 2013) [23], etc. show that how Christian mindfulness leading one to a deeper contemplation and mystical experience with divine.

3.2.4. *The Concept of Mindfulness in Islam*

A study conducted in the United Arab Emirates focused on the impact of a program namely, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR) consisted of eight weeks, revealed that the participants (Arab Muslims) of this program experienced better sleep, improved academic performance, healthier eating habits and more positive relationships (Thomas et al., 2016) [24], (Gold et al., 2010) [25]. The Islamic concept of mindfulness shows that mindfulness has a crucial role in one's personal devotion and prayer life. Many Muslims experience distracting thoughts and wandering minds during prayer. Although most Islamic legal scholars do not view mindfulness as a strict requirement for prayer, they regard it as highly recommended. Besides this, Islamic legal texts and manuals on personal devotion often guide its believers on how to overcome distractions and foster mindfulness during prayer (Thomas et al., 2017) [26]. In Islam, God is the central focus of awareness, embodied in the concept of *Muraqabha*. This state reflects a heightened self-awareness of one's relationship with Allah, involving the heart, mind, and body and a continuous, profound recognition that Allah is aware of one's internal and external actions (Kamarulbahri et al., 2024) [27]. Therefore, in Islamic tradition, mindfulness which is termed as '*taqua*', involves being conscious of one's actions, thoughts, and intentions that constitute Islamic principles. Hence, mindfulness in Islam emphasizes being present, remembering Allah, practising gratitude, and fulfilling one's religious duties. This form of mindfulness also fosters awareness of the divine presence and spiritual growth through memory, prayer, and reflection (Abid, 2021) [28].

3.3. *Secular Perspective of Mindfulness:*

Secular mindfulness programmes often incorporate elements of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and other evidence-based therapeutic methods to address mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and addiction. By integrating mindfulness practices into these approaches, practitioners expect to provide effective strategies for managing difficult emotions and behaviours (Hofmann & Gómez, 2017) [29]. Secular mindfulness is a practice that emphasises mindfulness techniques without any spiritual or religious context. It concentrates on present-moment mindfulness, nonjudgmental observations, and acceptance of experiences. It is widely used in the workplace, education, and health care, it aims to enhance mental wellness and reduce stress. This evidence-based approach serves as a tool for personal development in contemporary settings (Baer, 2003) [30]. However, in the secular perspective of mindfulness, the insights from Buddhist concept of mindfulness are adopted for therapeutic interventions due to extensive research demonstrating the benefits of mindfulness meditation for mental health, stress reduction, and cognitive performance (Keng et al., 2011) [31]. Consequently, the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) course aims to prevent depression relapse by teaching mind management skills that improve awareness and help patients to handle negative thoughts and respond more effectively (Teasdale et al., 2000) [32]. Further, mindfulness has been demonstrated to soothe the mind, stabilize the body, and improve overall health and well-being. It also helps us to be aware of the present moment and thereby to tap from our intuitive potentialities (Khandhar, 2023) [33].

3.3.1. *Applications of Mindfulness in Different Secular Fields*

In the Field of Education: Mindfulness programs are widely used in schools to aid children in social-emotional learning, attention regulation, and mental health. Research has primarily examined how such training impacts academic performance, behaviour and well-being for both students and teachers (Phan et al., 2022) [34]. ***In the Industrial Field:*** Numerous companies are integrating mindfulness-based

therapies into their workplace wellness initiatives to enhance the well-being of employees, performance and resilience. Research has explored how such training reduces stress levels, job satisfaction, and interpersonal dynamics within professional contexts (Schubin et al., 2023) [35]. ***In the Field of Medical Research and Practice:*** Mindfulness practice influences multiple brain regions, and ongoing neuroscience research examines its neurological effects on attention, emotion regulation and self-awareness (Marchand, 2014) [36]. Mindfulness-based interventions are gaining recognition in healthcare for their potential to alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing overall well-being. Ongoing research aims to assess their effectiveness across different clinical populations and healthcare settings (Keng et al., 2011) [37]. ***In the Field of Technology:*** Mindfulness practices are becoming more integrated with technology, including applications and wearable devices, to make them more accessible and convenient. These products offer guided meditation, and breathing exercises to users (Li et al., 2024) [38]. ***In the Field of Socio-cultural Contexts:*** There's a growing interest in adapting mindfulness interventions to diverse cultural contexts and populations to ensure that they are relevant and effective. Researchers and practitioners are exploring culturally sensitive approaches to mindfulness that respect value-based practices (Listiyandini et al., 2023) [39]. Hence, researchers can gain deeper insights into mindfulness across different faiths through comparative analysis, exploring its integration into religious rituals, scriptures, teaching, and its contributions to spiritual growth, ethical development, and communal well-being within various religious communities as it applies to various secular fields (Grossman, 2004) [40].

Table 1: Literature review summary

Sl. No	Area & Focus of the Research	The result of the Research	Reference
1.	This paper covers the practical areas of clinical psychology by emphasising mindfulness' testable operational definition.	The paper advocates defining mindfulness as the self-regulation of attention with an open and receptive attitude towards current occurrences. In this paper, the author establishes a consensus on mindfulness for developing a testable operational definition.	Bishop et al. (2004). [41]
2.	The book focuses on "Mindfulness in Early Buddhism" and discusses the origins and practices of mindfulness in early Buddhist traditions.	This book integrates psychological insights with textual examination of Pali, Chinese, and Sanskrit sources. It uses an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the historical context, theoretical foundations, and practical applications of mindfulness in early Buddhism, offering light on its evolution and significance in modern circumstances	Kuan (2007).[42]
3.	This paper reviews the area of neuroscience studies and makes a thorough overview of its relation to mindfulness meditation.	This paper examines the neurological mechanisms involved in mindfulness practice, such as changes in brain structure and function related to attention, emotion management, and self-awareness. it also summarizes significant findings from neuroimaging studies and discusses mindfulness's potential therapeutic applications for mental health and well-being	Tang et al. (2015). [43]

4.	This meta-analytic research looked at how mindfulness-based therapy (MBT) works to reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms.	The findings revealed that mindfulness-based therapy was linked to significant decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety. The findings indicate that MBT could be a promising technique for reducing psychological discomfort and promoting well-being.	Hofmann et al. (2010). [44]
5.	This book provides a thorough analysis of religious and spiritual practices in India through the lens of positive psychology. It also explores the implications of several themes for psychological well-being and positive functioning.	The book advances our understanding of how religious and spiritual activities support human flourishing in the Indian context by taking an interdisciplinary approach.	Singh and Saxena (2023).[45]
6.	This study investigated the impact of mindfulness on insight problem-solving.	It shows that mindfulness practices can enhance an individual's ability to be creative and flexible in thought processes, which are beneficial for addressing problems. The study provides factual support for training in mindfulness.	Ostafin and Kassman (2012). [46]
7.	This article overviews mindfulness in the context of positive psychology and focuses on its significance for endurance and mental health.	It highlights the advantages of mindfulness practices and treatments for lowering stress and improving quality of life.	Langer and Ngnoumen (2017). [47]
8.	This article incorporates mindfulness into Islamic environments and investigates its possible consequences for Muslim communities' mental health and well-being.	This article analyzes how mindfulness, which originated in secular environments, has found resonance with Islamic ideas and practices. It also brings out the parallels between mindfulness and Islamic notions like <i>tafakkur</i> (contemplation) and <i>dhikr</i> (remembrance of God), implying that mindfulness techniques can supplement conventional Islamic spiritual practices.	Thomas et al. (2017). [48]
9.	It focuses on thorough mental training based on the Buddha's mindfulness teachings, with a concentration on the <i>Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta</i> , which is a key discourse in Buddhism.	This handbook of mental training based on the Buddha's way of mindfulness intends to develop deep insights into the nature of phenomena which helps one to have true wisdom, vivid perception of reality and liberation (<i>moksha</i>) from suffering.	Thera (2005). [49]
10.	This book serves as a foundational guide to the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness (<i>Satipaṭṭhāna</i>). It is a comprehensive manual for mental training, based on the Buddha's mindfulness teachings.	This book provides practical direction on growing mindfulness in daily life through methodical meditation practices.	Nyanaponika (1969). [50]

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

In this article, the researcher makes a comparative study between religious and secular understanding of mindfulness by analyzing qualitative data collected through religious texts and literature on mindfulness from scholarly sources. Hence, the mixed method is purposefully avoided due to the lack of quantitative data. Consequently, the secondary sample sources of data collection methods are used here by utilizing sources like academic journals, books, and other reputable sources, to explore the meaning and cultural contexts associated with mindfulness practices within religious traditions and secular approaches. The textual data was collected through the key themes, concepts, and patterns related to the conceptualization and practice of mindfulness.

We have also framed hypotheses for this research study as detailed below.

Null Hypothesis (Ho)

There are no significant differences between the conceptualization and practice of mindfulness across religious traditions and secular approaches.

Research/Alternate Hypothesis 1

There are significant differences between the conceptualization and practice of mindfulness across religious traditions and secular approaches.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

There are various potential areas for future investigation. Longitudinal research can be done to understand the long-term effects of mindfulness practice. If it is a cross-sectional, we can gain a deeper understanding of how mindfulness is perceived and practised in non-Western culture and religion by people from various secular and religious backgrounds. If we utilise neuroimaging techniques to investigate how mindfulness impacts brain function and structure, and whether changes depend on religious or secular attitudes. Interventional studies can be conducted to determine how integrating mindfulness practices with religious teachings or secular psychology techniques (Mindfulness-Based treatments) leads to positive outcomes such as stress reduction, mental health, and well-being. It is also beneficial to create a technique for assessing religious and secular. A comparison between religious and secular notions of mindfulness will help us to understand its richness in various circles.

5.1. Comparison between the Religious and Secular Understanding of Mindfulness

ASPECTS OF MINDFULNESS	RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE	SECULAR PERSPECTIVE
Definition	Focuses on cultivating awareness, presence, and inner transformation through practices such as meditation and prayer.	Focuses on the cultivation of present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, often within a psychological or scientific framework.
Practice	Includes meditation techniques such as: 1. Mindfulness of breath regulation 2. Body Scanning technique 3. Love, Kindness, and Contemplative prayer. 4. Ritualistic practices and adherence to ethical precepts.	Utilizes structured mindfulness Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) which incorporate meditation, body awareness and cognitive strategies to promote well-being.
Goals	It is aimed at spiritual growth, self-transcendence, and connection with a higher power or ultimate reality. Seek to alleviate suffering and cultivate virtues	Primarily focuses on stress reduction, emotional regulation, and enhancing psychological well-being. Aims to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

	such as compassion, gratitude, and equanimity.	
Cultural Context	Embedded within religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity etc. they are often integrated into religious rituals, ceremonies, and teachings.	Adopted for secular settings such as education, workplace, health care and community programs. Emphasize universal principles of mindfulness that can be applied across diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
Role of Faith	Emphasizes the importance of faith, devotion, and surrender to a higher power or spiritual path. It encourages reliance on divine grace and guidance in the practice of mindfulness.	Focuses on empirical evidence and scientific research to support the efficacy of mindfulness practices. It also emphasizes personal agency and self-directed inquiry in cultivating skills of mindfulness.
Philosophical Views	Grounded in philosophical frameworks such as Buddhist psychology, Advaita Vedanta, Christian Mysticism, and Sufism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the impermanent nature of reality.	Draws on principles of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and behavioural therapy. It incorporates concepts such as cognitive restructuring, habit formation and attention regulation to explain the mechanism underlying mindfulness practices.

5.2. Limitations of the Study:

The present study is only a qualitative study made to compare the secular and religious perspectives of mindfulness. If we combine both qualitative and quantitative methods, then such a mixed approach can provide a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how mindfulness is conceptualized and practiced across religious and secular contexts, capturing both the depth and breadth of the phenomena.

5.3. Findings and Scope for Further Research:

This study on comparing religious and secular conceptions of mindfulness provides various opportunities for future research. To investigate the long-term effects of mindfulness, longitudinal research can be conducted, with individuals tracked over time to assess changes in their well-being, resilience, and so on. Cross-cultural comparisons are conceivable if we investigate how mindfulness is perceived and used in various cultural contexts around the world. Neuroscience can investigate how mindfulness practices influence brain function, emotional management, and other neurological processes. In conjunction with local leaders and organisations, we can promote mindfulness as a tool for social transformation and community development. Ethical consent and consideration are necessary, or else the report may cause religious belief conflict. Interventional and interdisciplinary studies can be conducted to determine which treatments are most useful to specific groups for better outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, this study expands our understanding of mindfulness as a human experience that surpasses religious as well as secular boundaries. We can employ the transformative power of mindfulness to uphold awareness, compassion, and well-being among people and communities across the globe by realizing the differences in perspectives and the common threads that link them together. It is also recommended that further research and discussions are needed to achieve complete mindfulness's promise as a impetus for social changes, spiritual awakening, and personal growth.

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