

Mindfulness: Adaptation of Eastern Religious Philosophy into Western Secular Science for Human Wellbeing – An Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction: This article analyses the vital role played by the construct mindfulness in human wellbeing. The article traces the roots of mindfulness, its evolution and adaptations of eastern religious philosophy and practice in western secular science. Popular books on mindfulness associating the concept to various principles, theories, practices, tools used in clinical set up in clinical psychology, management, personality development and general wellbeing programs, and journal articles comparing the concept and practice of mindfulness in ancient eastern culture and contemporary western secular society were the basis for analysis. The analysis revealed significant similarity between the two, while unravelling the much needed adaptations to suit wider and culturally diverse population with an ultimate goal of achieving and maintaining human wellbeing.

Keywords: Sati, Mindfulness, Five Aggregates, Meditation, Co-Emergent Reinforcement Model, PROMISE, MiCBT, MBSR.

1. Introduction

The construct mindfulness has become the central theme and tool in several programs offered for personality development, training of management and corporate professionals, learning enhancement in educational institutions at school and higher education levels, in clinical set up by clinical psychologists and for general public for wellbeing. Survey of literature on mindfulness reveals an exponential growth in the number of articles and also the number of journals in diverse disciplines in the last more than three decades. Though, an article on mindfulness study might describe about the benefit of mindfulness on a single aspect of human wellbeing like stress reduction, pain management, improved decision making competency, improved learning skill etc.; a comprehensive analysis of the articles would reveal a big picture on the multitude of benefits that mindfulness practice offers to overall wellbeing of an individual. The focus of this article is to bring out the isolation and adaptations of the concept and practice of mindfulness from eastern religious philosophy and integration in to global secular society, particularly by the west in behavioural science, in multiple dimensions of human life.

2. Origin of Mindfulness

The roots of the English word '*Mindfulness*' can be traced to ancient eastern Hindu philosophy, principles and practices such as "*Sanatana Dharma*" in ancient India. It refers to the natural and eternal way of living aiming at spiritual liberation, knowledge of self and enlightenment, transcending any religious boundaries. Fading away of this practice over time resulted in human sufferings. Several spiritual schools of thought and associated practices evolved as a result of search for the cause of, and solution to the human sufferings. Buddhism which is more than 2500 years old, popularised and made accessible even to layman the tools and techniques for alleviating the sufferings and guiding them for '*nibbana*'. The teachings of Buddha are written in Pali language in Buddhist's literature such as '*SatipatthanaSutta*' and '*MahasatipatthanaSutta*'. The word '*Mindfulness*' is English translation of the word '*Sati*' in Pali language. According to Plank who is a researcher in history of religion at Lund University "*the term 'Sati' is a complex concept integrating several aspects and therefore is difficult to translate*". According to Kabat-Zinn mindfulness is defined as "*paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally*" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). It is the central theme in Theravada meditation and is suggested to be "*the only way*" for realising the supreme goal of "*nibbana*" meaning liberation. '*Sati*' among other aspects, mainly includes a

meditation process which intends to develop a realization of the “*fundamental conditions of existence*” and recognition of its continuous change (*annica*), and impermanency (*anatta*) of everything within our self and around us including the notion of self. Ignorance or lack of awareness of this impermanency is the cause of dissatisfaction (*dukkha*). Mindfulness can be considered as one aspect of eight-fold path suggested in Buddhism to be followed in daily life for achieving liberation from sufferings. (Liselotte Frisk; 2020).

3. Evolution of Mindfulness and its migration to western world

The meaning and practice of ‘*Sati*’, over the years has seen changes and simplification due to the translation of texts on Buddha’s teachings written in Pali into other languages like Chinese, Japanese including English, and emergence of different schools of thought within Buddhism. Migration of spiritual leaders and scholars across the globe and interaction between them facilitated the recognition of benefits of Buddhist’s meditation and the isolation and hybridisation of Buddhist’s meditation practice in several different names and forms but with the prime concern of alleviating the suffering and dispelling of illusions. Various forms of meditation practices such as “*focusing on breath, body scan meditation, sitting meditation walking meditation etc.*”; introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn in therapeutic set up in the west are a few examples to cite.

“*Transcendental Meditation*” (TM) advocated by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi from India was introduced in the west much ahead of Mindfulness. The benefits of TM were well established by several scientific research which include, for example, “*improved intelligence, better memory, increased creativity, decreasing high blood pressure, improved sleep, improved relations to others, less stress, and increased self-confidence*”, but it did not become popular and widely adopted as is mindfulness today, for being affiliated to Indian religion, projection of Maharishi as spiritual Guru and the mantra used for meditation purpose.

On the other hand, Jon Kabat-Zinn mindfulness an American professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, introduced and popularised mindfulness in west world and was readily accepted by larger secular population for being isolated religious tag and not emphasising any belief and spiritual orientation. Kabat-Zinn (2013), developed therapeutic programs such as Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (MiCBT) by integrating mindfulness in therapeutic techniques in psychology. Application of these tools in clinical practice proved to benefit the clients as documented in several scientific studies. He does not hide or deny connection of mindfulness to Buddhism, but has accepted isolation of the meditation aspect from its spiritual orientation and related practices, to reap the benefits of meditation to human wellbeing. He also argues that “*mindfulness is just a particular way of paying attention, and that its essence is universal, although it is most commonly taught and practised within the context of Buddhism*” (Kabat-Zinn (2013)). At this juncture a pertinent questions arise.

‘Is it mindfulness alone is an isolation and adaptation in western secular science and society or there are other such philosophies and practices which have been adapted and popularised in western science?’ The discussion below attempts to explore the adaptations of the ideals proposed in eastern religion, with particular reference to Buddhism into secular western society.

4. Mindfulness and mindlessness

Mindfulness is just one construct isolated and adapted from Buddhism and integrated into western science in multiple disciplines, particularly in psychology. It is one of the eight-fold paths to be followed to end human sufferings. The cause of sufferings as per Buddhism is craving and ignorance about the impermanent nature of everything within one self and around us including the notion of self. By practicing mindfulness one will get enlightened and freed from sufferings. This is purely a subjective experience. But, the concept of mindfulness emerged in western world only thirty years ago. However, a construct ‘mindlessness’ the opposite of mindfulness has been an active area of research who were looking for the cause of sufferings. Mindlessness is defined as “*an inactive state of mind characterized by reliance on distinctions/categories drawn in the past. Here: (1) the past over-determines the present; (2) we are trapped in a single perspective but oblivious to that entrapment; (3) we’re insensitive to context; and (4) rules and routines govern rather than guide our behaviour. Moreover, mindlessness typically comes about by default not by design*”.; (Ellen J. Langer 1989 ; Ellen J. Langer; 2014; Amanda IeChristelle T. Ngnoumen Ellen J. Langer; (2014),)Being objective and measurable

being the way of their study, the functional definition of ‘mindlessness’, its all pervasive nature, examples from everyday life, and consequences of mindlessness have been well documented by empirical studies. The independent, pioneering works of Ellen J. Langer are important ones. Examples of mindlessness and its consequences cited by her include the historical event of Russian invasion of Napoleon, to the illness ideology of psychological science. Recognition of the “*other side of the coin*” of mindlessness in these examples reveal the concept of, and the benefits of being mindful by pointing out in the examples cited above as the response of Russian army general Kutuzov, and emergence of positive psychology. According to Langer ((E. J. Langer 2014) the key qualities of being in a mindful state are: “(1) *creation of new categories*; (2) *openness to new information*; and (3) *awareness of more than one perspective*.” Langer and co-workers developed strategies to inculcate mindfulness and investigated the effects objectively. Her strategies focused on cognitive processes that emphasize concentration and challenging the intellect by engaging the participants in “*word production*” (E. J. Langer 2014) or demanding “*out of the box thinking*” (*assigning a creative task*) (Carmody JF. (2014)). Her research also expands to the investigation and comparison of Eastern philosophy and practice of mindfulness with that of its western versions.

5. Nibbana and equanimity

An analysis and discussion on mindfulness from Buddhist philosophical perspective cannot avoid a brief note on ‘Nibbana’ in Pali language, ‘Nirvana’ in Sanskrit. The term can be defined as the “*highest state of profound wellbeing, a human is capable of attaining*” and at this state “*the mind awakens from delusion, is liberated from bondage, is cleansed of all its defilements, becomes entirely at peace, experiences complete cessation of suffering, and is no longer reborn*” (Andrew Olendzki, Tricycle, 2019). A construct analogous to ‘nibbana’ could not be found in the western psychology. The term being used to describe the ultimate goal of life and emphasising the belief in rebirth could be the reason for omission of the construct in western adaptation. But, one of the benefits of the practice of mindfulness in western science is attributed to the trait ‘Equanimity’, which is defined in modern psychology as “*an even – minded mental state or dispositional tendency toward all experiences or objects, regardless of their affective valence (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral) or source*” ((GaelleDesborders et al 2015), In Buddhist philosophy the term “*upekka*” or a compound word “*tatramajjhata*” in Pali, “*upeksha*” in Sanskrit is used which is defined as “*being in the middle which refers to remaining centered in the middle of whatever is happening*”. (Gill Fronsda. Adapted by Insight Meditation Cener, 2004). The term equanimity can be considered as English translation of ‘upekka’. Equanimity shields human being “*from the eight worldly winds ie praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Becoming attached to or excessively elated with success, praise, fame or pleasure can be a cause of suffering when the winds of life change direction*”. The trait of equanimity is suggested to develop by the “*strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity*”, which in turn are the effects of mindfulness practice of any kind. While in Buddhism, this balance is achieved by meditation practice and other aspects of Buddhist practice as a subjective experience, in western psychological science which is based on objective, measurable constructs, equanimity has been used as a measurable construct to assess the effects of mindfulness practice and an appropriate model ‘**PROMISE**’; has been developed, tested and validated and employed in clinical set ups. (Juliane Eberth, Peter Sedlmeier and Thomas Schafer, 2019)

6. Five aggregates of mind and co-emergent reinforcement model

The search for the cause of and solution to human sufferings both in ancient religions and contemporary secular society as discussed in the above sections has unravelled the fact that unawareness or mindlessness as a cause and meditation or mindfulness as a means to overcome the suffering. It can be inferred that the choice of suffering or being happy rests with the mind which then necessitates an understanding of the function of, and the factors contributing to the function of the mind.

In Buddhist paradigm the concept “Five-aggregates” that constitutes “*oneself*” is mainly related to the mind. Interactions between the aggregates and manifestations of aggregates constitutes the behaviour of an individual. The five aggregates are: “(1) *material form* (2) *feelings*, (3) *perception*, (4) *volition*, and (5) *sensory consciousness*”. In this model, “*material form*” refers to the physical body and external environment, “*feelings*” relate to the subjective affective impacts of an experience, “*perceptions*” represent being aware of attributes of

an object, and “*volition*” describes the reactive or purposive aspect of the mind (including both intention and behaviour). Volition can manifest itself in bodily and/or verbal and/or psychological behaviour. The term “*sensory consciousness*” refers to “*being conscious of experiencing a sensory stimulus, or being conscious of a thought concerning the past, present, or future*” and that experiences are impermanent arising and vanishing from moment to moment. The Buddhist tradition encourages understanding the consciousness by attending to constantly changing aggregates. This entails careful monitoring of the moment-to-moment changes occurring in an individual’s subjective experience. This monitoring in turn necessitates a calm mind which is wandering by nature leading to mental proliferation where all kinds of thoughts arise. Practicing focused attention meditation like focusing on breath or body scan can reduce mind wandering and enhance attention enabling observation of moment-to-moment changes in the five aggregates creating an awareness of the impermanency of the subjective experiences.

Adaptation of the Buddhist model by Kabat-Zinn without its religious tag and popularised as mindfulness meditation encourages “*an open monitoring meditation where one is attentive moment by moment to anything that occurs in experience without focusing on any explicit object. This leads to gaining insight into the nature of experienced phenomena*” (Analayo, 2006; Lutz et al., 2008; Nanaponika, 1962).

Co-emergent reinforcement (CMR) model developed by Bruno A. Cayoun and Alice G. Shires (2020) and applied for introspective desensitization and mindfulness integrated therapies in clinical set up is an integrated approach to behaviour maintenance and change integrating the “*elements of cognitive neuroscience, learning theory, and the five aggregates,*” of Buddhist paradigm. (Narada, 1968; Nyanaponika, 1996; Bodhi, 2000). The components of co-emergent model are: (1) Sensory stimulus (internal or external) (2) sensory perception (3) evaluation (conscious or automatic) (4) co-emergent introspection (body sensations) and (5) response. These five components form a feedback loop resulting in vicious cycle between sensory perception – evaluation – co-emergent introspection – response. When these components are in equilibrium the manifestation of response is within socially acceptable norms or else a disequilibrium situation leads clinically significant abnormal behaviour necessitating clinical intervention. Integration of mindfulness in clinical interventions has demonstrated restoration of equilibrium and hence improved mental health.

Although both Buddhist Five-aggregate model and western co-emergent reinforcement model appear to be similar and the later has integrated the elements of the former, the goal of the two models are entirely different and contradictory. The obvious contradictions are:

(1) Five – aggregate model is to create awareness about the impermanent nature of everything, to desensitise the concept of ‘self’ and to promote the state of ‘non-self’ and liberation and ultimately attain nibbana.

But the purpose of western co-emergent reinforcement model is to have a theoretical foundation for analysing the mechanism of human behaviour and apply in clinical set ups.

(2) In Buddhist ideology gaining awareness through focused meditative practice is a purely subjective experience;

But western model encourages open monitoring meditation (Kabet-zinn) as a means of restoration of equilibrium and the effects are observable and measurable.

7. Being mindful Buddhists strategies and western strategies

The method of teaching or inculcating mindfulness to practitioners also vary widely. The Buddhist tradition emphasise meditation for gaining an insight about the fundamental conditions of existence, its changing nature, its impermanency and realising the cause of suffering. Meditation is a tool to transcend the self and attain liberation. In Theravada tradition this kind of meditation is known as ‘*vipassana*’ meditation which is synonymous with ‘*satipanthna*’.

Another kind of meditation is concentration meditation known as ‘*samatha*’ as mentioned in some Buddhist’s literature. Teaching mindfulness in western secular society mostly adopt concentration meditation of some kind to promote attention. Focusing on breath, body scan, sitting meditation, walking meditation are some of the

strategies used by Kabat-Zinn. Langer also developed and used techniques like ‘word production’ and ‘out of the box thinking’. The techniques applied in west are aimed at enhancing positive cognitive functioning and health, and controlling negative emotions, thoughts and behaviour without any religious or spiritual orientations.

The meditation techniques practiced in Buddhism are subjective experience and therefore process oriented but the ones applied in the west are objective and outcome based aimed at a scientific study of the benefits of meditation.

8. Conclusion

Overall human well-being both physical and mental has been the most fundamental desire of the society at all times transcending the regional, religious and cultural boundaries. The discussion in this article unravels the openness to an old religious technique which facilitated the overall human well-being with adaptations to suit their belief and acceptance by a secular society.

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