

## The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mindfulness Practices: A Qualitative Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the academic literature on mindfulness has grown rapidly as it uncovers similarities and differences between mindfulness practices in Buddhism, Stoic philosophy, and Christian meditation. This research, which is still in its early stages, aims to distinguish the specific notes or elements that represent each of these mindfulness practices within a conceptual framework. Measuring mindfulness practices' efficiency and therapeutic efficacy requires selecting a subset of variables that specifically represent the practice. Failure to do so may result in a threat to construct validity. This qualitative study aims to explore the relationship between mindfulness and spirituality by collecting data through a literature review. The results reveal that religion, ethics, and spirituality are crucial components of the explanatory model of mindfulness practice. This is because religious and spiritual traditions allow it to become a form of psychotherapy with various modalities of attention regulation. This study contributes to the scientific understanding of mindfulness practices by highlighting the importance of examining them in the context of religion and spirituality and developing a better conceptual understanding of them across different traditions.

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### Introduction

The body of scientific literature on mindfulness has grown exponentially. Since Kabat Zinn founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in 1978 at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the fields of application and research that have been opened regarding mindfulness have multiplied over the last five decades. In the field of psycho-clinical research and health sciences, in

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general, particular attention has been paid to the task of visualizing and measuring the therapeutic efficiency of this Buddhist practise that is no less than 2,500 years old (Coronado-Montoya et al., 2016; Dimidjian & Segal, 2015).

Mindfulness means consciously attending to the experience of the present moment with interest, curiosity, and acceptance. Williams & Kabat-Zinn, (2013) defines mindfulness as «the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally» (145). It is a form of 'attention' or 'consciousness' that allows us to relate directly to the moment, that is, to the "here and now" that we are living.

However, the task of measuring the efficiency or efficacy of mindfulness-based mental health interventions requires selecting a partial set of variables that specifically represent said practice. Failure to comply with this requirement could threaten the studies with what is recognized as a threat to construct validity. The threat to construct validity is the incapacity of the conceptual basis to account for the dynamics of the phenomenon studied (Finger & Rand, 2003; A. Kazdin, 2001; A. E. Kazdin, 2008). The deficiencies in this task of making explicit the unique or emergent properties of mindfulness and selecting specific variables that are representative of this practice may represent an epistemic threat to the very methodological validity of such studies.

As a hypothesis, it consigns the need to study this and other practices in the spiritual contexts in which they have been originally formulated since it is possible to discriminate the specific modalities that different types of attention regulation practices can adopt. The work will be divided into two parts to account for this hypothesis. First, we will point out the epistemic and methodological limits of technical eclecticism frequently adopted in psycho-clinical studies that measure mindfulness's therapeutic efficacy. Secondly, we will outline some of the specific notes of the mindfulness practice by which it is possible to differentiate it from other attention practices.

Previous researchers have conducted research on mindfulness. The studies of Sellars, (2018), Graiver, (2016, 2018), Peretó Rivas, (2017, 2019, 2021) and Buju, (2019) sought to uncover similarities and differences between mindfulness in Buddhism and certain Stoic and Christian meditation practices. Such investigations, which are still in the early stages of development, seek to discern, in a conceptual setting, the notes or elements that specifically represent each of these mindfulness practices.

As for this research, it is done with the assumption that it is not necessarily the case that oriental meditation techniques (Buddhism in particular) are superior to other forms of meditation. Therefore, it is still necessary to compare them with other forms of meditation, such as those spreading in Western culture, and that is what will be examined in this article.

The value of this study does not lie so much in the originality or novelty of its thesis but, rather, in the systematization or precision with which it seeks to indicate the need to attend to the semantic or spiritual elements concomitant to the practice of mindfulness.

## **Method**

The method used in this research is a qualitative method with data collection through a literature study. A literature study is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating printed and electronic documents (computer-based and transmitted via the internet). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, literature study requires data to be reviewed and interpreted to gain meaning, understand, and develop empirical knowledge.

### ***Research context***

In this paper, the researcher wants to see how mindfulness in a spiritual context. Therefore, the researcher collected data through literature studies by reading sources such as books, journals, and so on, which are considered relevant to the research problem. This literature study is included in qualitative research. A literature study is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating printed and electronic documents (computer-based and transmitted via the internet). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, desk studies also require that data be examined and interpreted to derive meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009).

### ***Instrument and data collection***

The data used in this study were obtained from various sources and literature related to the research problem. In this research, two types of data are used: primary and secondary. Primary data sources are the main data sources used in this research and come from books discussing mindfulness in Buddhism's spiritual context. Secondary data sources are sources collected after primary data has been collected. This secondary source is used in order to complement or add to the primary data that has been collected previously. Secondary sources in this research come from literature reviews in the form of journals, theses, papers, and other previous studies.

### ***Data analysis***

To determine the validity of data, data analysis techniques are needed. The implementation of data-checking techniques is based on a number of certain criteria, starting from finding data, analyzing data, looking for additional data, checking the validity of the data, and finally making an analysis to verify research findings (Bowen, 2009). In this study, what is prioritized is the credibility test carried out by checking the validity of sources and methods to achieve nothing but the truth about existing phenomena. The source validity test referred to in this study, namely by comparing and cross-checking the degree of trust in information that has been previously obtained. Meanwhile, to test the validity of the method, namely checking the degree of trust in the findings of the research results and checking the degree of trust in several data sources. After carrying out the credibility test, the final stage is to make an analysis to verify the research findings that have been carried out.

## Findings

### ***Understand attention practices in their religious-spiritual contexts***

One of the models of appropriation of originally religious or spiritual practices, which has the most consensus today, is the one that translates spiritual practices into concentration techniques (Williams & Swales, 2004). This model aims to measure ethical or religious practices in terms of psychotherapeutic efficiency, disregarding all the theories or spiritual principles that sustain them.

Technical eclecticism is nothing but a model of an a-theoretical assumption that seeks to measure clinical efficiency, practices that originally belonged to ethical or spiritual traditions. Without inquiring into the theoretical assumptions that account for the ethical-spiritual meaning or purpose of these practices, they are translated into a mere technique capable of improving the clinical efficacy of a therapy.

Following this eclectic model of integration, multiple studies have been carried out regarding the effectiveness of incorporating Buddhist and Hindu meditation practices as part of a psychotherapeutic process –be it in situations of stress, anxiety, depression, eating problems, insomnia, sexual dysfunctions, addictions and different medical conditions such as chronic pain, digestive problems, diabetes or hypertension– (Baer, 2003; Coronado-Montoya et al., 2016; Goleman & Davison, 2017; Sansó et al., 2018; Siegel, 2012; Vallejo & Ortega, 2008).

Formulating a generic definition of "attention" is difficult since each of these traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or Stoicism) uses the term with very different meanings. However, it is not difficult to find studies that translate these very dissimilar practices into mere efficient technology to manipulate attention and promote relaxation and self-exploration (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). In one way or another, these studies formulate a technique as a common denominator independent of its original religious, cultural, and ideological content.

The difficulty of this model of re-appropriation of the technique lies in the very process of reinventing spiritual practice. This process of redefining spiritual practice establishes new efficiency parameters that are often alien to the philosophical and spiritual substrate in which they were originally formulated. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether or not the studies deal with their own and original psychotherapeutic potential, in this case, the practice of mindfulness, or if it is a new technique whose efficiency levels are explained in terms unrelated to it.

These epistemic and methodological considerations allow us to fully understand the distinction established by Fernández, García, & Crespo, (2012) between mindfulness as a pre-scientific practice of zen Buddhist meditation and mindfulness as a clinical technique. Ultimately, it is about two different modalities of attention regulation where the effects of the second can be very different from the original effect pursued by the first.

Along the same lines, Bodhi, (2016) qualifies as immanent the new mindfulness modalities that are adapted in the West for therapeutic purposes. According to him, these practices would cease to serve their original objectives, such as the transcendence of life; for which it would no longer be the same practice. Nyanaponika Thera, for his part, argues that these new modalities would not respect the traditional meaning of *sati* (remember, keep in mind *the true nature of phenomena*, that is, their relativity).

Psycho-clinical research on the various attention regulation practices requires selecting a partial set of variables that are representative of the specific notes that characterize each of its modalities. Psycho-clinical research must identify and reflect the differences and specific modalities between these and other attentional regulation practices; the results obtained can effectively refer to each of them. For this, the task of selecting a set of observable variables and indicators of the specific notes that characterize each of these modalities is essential.

This task can be affected by what is recognized as the threat to construct validity, which is nothing but the inability of the conceptual basis to account for the dynamics of the phenomenon studied (Anderson & Kim, 2003; Barlow, 1981; Finger & Rand, 2003; A. Kazdin, 2001; A. E. Kazdin, 2008; Roberts & Ilardi, 2003).

The selection of generic or ambiguous variables, that is, poorly defined and unspecific, generates inadequate preoperational explication of the attention practices; and this directly affects the very possibility of attributing the results of the studies to the underlying phenomenon that the studies claim to represent (A. Kazdin, 2001).

A basic requirement of experimental designs is to distinguish the specific variables that represent the phenomenon to be studied and to differentiate them from the extraneous variables that could intervene in the design. Experimental designs require establishing operational definitions of each attention regulation practice in particular, whether they belong to a clinical or spiritual context. That is, it translate into observable indicators such as speech acts or behaviours that specifically represent it. These empirical references allow for establishing a baseline that is nothing more than the comparative parameter that allows evaluation, such as its possible psychotherapeutic effects.

To meet this requirement, the study by Jiménez et al., (2020) has proposed a testable operational definition. They postulate two indicators in terms of specific behaviours, experiential manifestations, and implicated psychological processes that apparently would constitute the two main components of mindfulness, namely: on the one hand, the regulation of attention to maintain it on the immediate experience, and the approaching of those experiences with an orientation of curiosity, openness, and acceptance, regardless of their valence or desirability, on the other.

These two behaviours would constitute the observable indicators or empirical referents that would represent the conceptual and operational distinctiveness of mindfulness and that, therefore, they would allow to measure its effectiveness concerning another variable such as the reduction of stress, or any other variable related to mental or physical health.

However, and even admitting that the cited variables could at least partially reflect the practice of *mindfulness*, it is necessary to review whether these variables are formulated sufficiently specifically. Torneatto & Nguyen, (2007), Baer, (2003), Orgiles & Sevilla, (2013), have objected to these two variables discriminated by Jiménez et al., (2020) since they do not seem to behave as specific variables of the mindfulness of the Buddhist tradition. They argue, in one way or another, that they represent ambiguous variables or, at least, comparable to various spiritual practices of attention and even to certain psychotherapeutic practices that the cognitive-behavioural school in the 1950s has already evaluated. These two

operationalizations of mindfulness are analogous to the strategy of interoceptive exposure to one's thoughts or bodily sensations, to the meta-cognitive ability to differentiate disturbing or intrusive thoughts from one's self and to other self-control and relaxation techniques which were systematized and measured by the cognitive-behavioural school, long before mindfulness became fashionable –claim the aforementioned authors claim. In the same vein, it is worth asking, what is the new or original strategy proposed by mindfulness for contemporary psychotherapy? And it is at this point of the question where the dilemma that we are interested in highlighting opens: either the spiritual context of mindfulness is protected or this apparently would not represent any novelty for psychotherapy.

The selection of ambiguous variables, poorly defined and unspecific, attentive, as we said, against the same internal validity of the research. It is said that there is internal validity when the results of the investigation can be attributed to a specific variable. Not delimiting or identifying the distinctive elements of mindfulness practice is equivalent to not having any definition yet.

The self-regulation of consciousness and the attention to the immediate are not specific variables due to the multiple significance that these behaviour patterns can have in a population. Without performing any test of homogeneity, the studies could assume that the experimental group regulates consciousness and attends to the immediate in the same way; ignoring the wide cognitive, emotional and sensory differences that can coexist in this multidimensional experience. This ambiguous operationalization of variables can acquire multiple significance in a population. Therefore, they cannot be presented in the design as specific variables that have a unilateral impact on a population's physical or mental health.

To the extent that attentional practices belong to different clinical or ethical-spiritual traditions, there may be substantive differences regarding the way of understanding and experiencing them. Depending on the tradition to which they belong, these practices could refer to experiences with cognitive styles and emotional dynamics that can be diverse and even reciprocally incommensurable. In short, these functional analyzes could ignore the substantive differences that coexist among the members of a population regarding their way of understanding and experiencing the selected variables.

### **The practice of mindfulness as a specific modality of spirituality**

Buddhist meditation is a lifestyle supported by a particular type of spirituality with a concomitant cognitive style. It is not a computational process or a technique that can be acquired mechanically. As it has been operationalized in the vast majority of psycho-clinical studies, mindfulness differs from its original Buddhist usage (Marlatt et al., 2004). The attempt to translate this millenary practice into a mere exercise situated in a psychological intervention disregards, in most cases, its original moral foundations (Hyland, 2017; Mañas, 2009; Singh Sikh & Spence, 2016).

Numerous studies have echoed this complaint. But going one step further, some have objected to the very possibility of developing psycho-clinical studies that specifically measure the efficacy of this ancient practice: either because in the operationalization of mindfulness it is not possible to register the intensity and gradual progression of the stability of attention (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011)

because there are a variety of practices that are being included under the same term (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015) because measurement scales neglect their ethical foundations (Hyland, 2017) or because such scales present an adulterated understanding of what the mind is (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011).

Taking part in this discussion, we believe that it is possible to qualitatively improve psycho-clinical research on the efficacy of mindfulness insofar as its concomitant semantic properties are made explicit. As we showed in the previous point, the deficiencies in this task could pose an epistemic threat to the methodological validity of such studies.

Next, we will explain one of its ontological and spiritual assumptions to get closer to the formulation of a possible variable that specifically represents the semantic world of mindfulness. Numerous studies have focused on making explicit the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of non-dualist oriental philosophies. In this direction, all of them indirectly collaborate with this project of overcoming all kinds of dialectics between technique and theory, integrating the semantic elements of mindfulness in the same psycho-clinical measurements.

Along these lines, the study by Singh Sikh & Spence (2016) can be cited, who carry out a process of immersion in non-dualist oriental philosophies and subsequent translation of these assumptions in terms of western hermeneutical philosophy. Heidegger's notion of "Being" that dissolves the distance between subject and object would behave, according to them, like the analogous term capable of translating and expressing the ontological unity of the experience of mindfulness where all dualities are suspended, including those created by the own thought and the language.

In continuity with these analyses, it is also worth mentioning the study of Gunaratana, (2011) where he explains that mindfulness is linked to levels of consciousness that transcend the distortions of conceptualization. The pure states of mindfulness are nothing but the immediate understanding of the three attributes of the true nature of all phenomena: impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and the absence of a permanent subjective entity (*anatta*). The Buddhist philosopher insists that Buddhism does not propose such truths as dogmas that require blind faith but are universal truths, self-evident and inherent in the practice of mindfulness itself. These truths expose or verbalize what is understood through an experience as separate aspects (Gunaratana, 2011).

Such assumptions must be integrated or articulated in psycho-clinical studies as the intentional contents concomitant to the practice of mindfulness. Faced with this approach, it could be objected that mindfulness is a non-conceptual and non-verbal state of consciousness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Siegel, 2012). Therefore, rescuing this conceptual or intentional correlate of its experience would not seem necessary.

Certainly, there have been voices that insist that these fundamental truths are not metaphysical principles organizing experience but arise from the same bodily states that the practice of mindfulness induces (Nishitani, 2003). But this is not an obstacle at all, to recognize that there is semantics or a world of meaning that is concomitant to said practice. In these bodily experiences, the lack of self is fundamentally experienced, and the phenomenal nature of the subject-object relationship is made aware of and therefore of the suffering that it entails. Mindfulness, as an alert attitude to what happens in the mind, is nothing more than

an individual self-observation that allows stopping not only the permanence of certain attachments and psychological habits but fundamentally destroys the idea of a fixed and permanent self.

Mahayana philosophy, indebted to the work of Nagarjuna, denounces that certain earlier schools only attack the self as a psychological attachment but do not deal with the substantial metaphysical concept of self. The bodily state that facilitates mindfulness makes present the *sunyata*, that is, the emptiness of all phenomena, that is, the inexistence of a subject, of a relationship and the object, explain Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, (1997).

Well, if it is intended to measure the effects of this millenary practice, then studies must collect this ontological-cognitive substrate as a specific variable that characterizes it. Today the emphasis is on the emotional and ethical skills that are favoured by the practice of mindfulness such as generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy, compassion, gratitude, inclusion, and equanimity (Alvear, 2015; Cebolla, Enrique, Alvear, Soler, & García-Campayo, 2017; Hyland, 2017; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009). But Mindfulness is not simply a decalogue of values, it is a way of understanding the world. The particular cognitive style that promotes ceasing to perceive objects as substances, to feel them only as momentary additions that occur must be recognized as a variable that characterizes the practice of mindfulness.

This element of a perceptual-cognitive nature (beliefs and perceptions regarding the meaning of the phenomena and the subject-object relationship nature) are a central descriptive component of mindfulness practice. The immediate phenomenal plane of this individual experience can be explained in terms of these intentional specificities. Or to put it another way, if this intentional element is excluded from the same process of identifying variables, a series of epistemic and methodological limits are followed for psycho-clinical research which can be recognized, as we pointed out in the first part of the study, as the threat to construct validity.

The studies on spirituality must attend to the religious or philosophical elements of its contents. Certain lines of research emphasize the character broad and diffuse that the term spirituality denotes to the extent that the intentional or ontological contents that characterize it are not made explicit (Heelas, Woodhead, See, Szerszynski, & Tusting, 2005; Hill et al., 2000; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Piedmont, 1999). The cognitive and conscious content recovered, thanks to cognitive psychology, a central place in the investigation. The cognitive, understood as a broad concept, refers to the process of meaningful knowledge that mental operations carry out. Naturally, this concept is the occasion for discussions and various positions regarding the nature of this intentional representation (Leder, 2016; Riviere, 1987). But what we are interested in highlighting, in this same line of analysis, is the need for the practice of mindfulness, or other modalities of attention regulation, to be measured and compared by their intentional content.

The different philosophical, religious, and spiritual traditions, with their respective doctrinal systems, beliefs, dogmas, etc., have the potential to discriminate and make explicit the substantive differences that can be adopted by the different ways to regulate attention.

Certainly, psycho-clinical research is interested in analyzing the cognitive, affective, behavioural, and physiological aspects of attention regulation practices, and not their institutional and doctrinal aspects. However, a radical distinction between practice and theory may leave clinical research with a dark and empty concept of attention. Only the intentional content offered by different religious or spiritual traditions can act as the criterion by which specific variables can be selected. To the extent that the theoretical and semantic principles of a religious and spiritual tradition are reviewed or considered, it is how the research could evaluate the emotional and cognitive structures specific to a particular practice of attention regulation in a population and measure, a posteriori, their incidence in some another variable.

Research on the clinical efficacy of the various modalities of regulation of attention cannot be conceived as a discipline enclosed in its limits. It must complement, or even more, venture into the conceptual domains of the religious or spiritual traditions in which these practices have been originally formulated, to discover the elements that specify and differentiate each one of them.

## Conclusion

Psycho-clinical research must recognize that the religious, ethical and spiritual world is a core and necessary part of the explanatory models of attentional practices. Pretending to formulate an explanatory model of these practices that do not address at all the cognitive content they acquire, depending on the religious or spiritual tradition in which they are inscribed, paradoxically represents a real detriment to psycho-clinical research. The functional understanding of the operative complexes that intervene in the self-regulation of attention must be explained in terms of the semantic specificities that support and accompany it.

In this way, a strange paradox arises: insofar as psycho-clinical research incorporates or attends to pre-scientific elements or foreign to scientific rationality –such as the field of spiritual and religious traditions– studies psycho-clinical acquire greater explanatory force. It is necessary to continue identifying various modalities of attention regulation, specifically paying attention to the intentional content in which they were originally formulated. After all, these intentional or cognitive frameworks provided by religious and spiritual traditions are what ultimately make it possible to compare the psychotherapeutic efficacy of different modalities of attention regulation.

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