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## Review Article

# The Vedic Foundations of Secular Mindfulness: A Study of Upaniṣad and Yoga Influences

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This paper explores the Vedic foundations of secular mindfulness, particularly examining the influences of Advaita Vedānta, Patañjali Yoga, and Haṭha Yoga systems on the development of contemporary mindfulness practices, specifically as popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn through his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. While mindfulness is often recognized for its Buddhist origins, this research highlights the underexplored connections to Vedic contemplative traditions, demonstrating that secular mindfulness may owe a significant debt to these ancient systems. The study delves into key Vedic concepts such as intrinsic wholeness, perpetual availability, and non-duality, and compares them with the philosophical underpinnings of Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness approach. Through an analysis of primary Vedic texts and Kabat-Zinn's own writings, the paper argues that his secularization of mindfulness is not only an innovative adaptation but also deeply influenced by Vedic philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedānta. The findings suggest that secular mindfulness, as practiced today, may be more closely aligned with Vedic traditions than previously acknowledged, offering a new perspective on the historical and philosophical roots of this widely adopted practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Mindfulness, in its secular form, has gained widespread recognition for its beneficial effects on stress and depression. While mindfulness is commonly recognized for its origins in Buddhism, its historical and philosophical connections to other traditions remain underexplored. Specifically, there is a lack of comparative research between Vedic contemplative and philosophical perspectives and contemporary secular mindfulness-based programs.

This research is crucial for two main reasons: first, the Vedic tradition is recognized as the oldest contemplative tradition and has profoundly influenced Asian contemplative practices (Felipe & Knight, 2010; Thompson, 2014), and second, recent works on secular

mindfulness have acknowledged and referenced these influences, particularly those stemming from *Advaita Vedānta* and *Yoga* systems (Kathirasan & Rai, 2023; Shaw, 2020; Wagh-Gumaste, 2022). Therefore, a comprehensive examination of mindfulness in relation to its Vedic influences, particularly through the contemplative and soteriological traditions of *Advaita Vedānta*, *Patañjali Yoga*, and *Haṭha Yoga*, is both timely and essential.

Deutsch (1969, p.3) defines *Advaita Vedānta* as a “non-dualistic system of *Vedānta* primarily expounded by Śaṅkara,” emphasizing its central concern with demonstrating the ultimate non-reality of all distinctions—asserting that Reality is not composed of parts and, in essence, is indistinguishable from the Self. *Advaita Vedānta*, which literally translates to “non-dual teachings of the concluding sections of the *Vedas*,” is rooted in the *Upaniṣads*, and can be traced back to as early as 700 BCE (Olivelle, 1998).

The *Yoga Sūtra*, attributed to its author *Patañjali*, may have been written or compiled as early as the first century CE (Bryant, 2009). These teachings represent one of the earliest known attempts to systematize the contemplative practices of the Vedic tradition, although they are not easily understood without accompanying commentary. The earliest known commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra* was provided by *Vyāsa* in the 5th century CE. This system of contemplative philosophy is also referred to as *Patañjali Yoga*.

*Haṭha Yoga* is a psychosomatic religious practice rooted in the *Tantras*, emphasizing physical techniques and discipline over metaphysical speculation (Birch, 2011). It emerged in its most distinct form around the 12th century CE. The numerous extant *Haṭha Yoga* texts span the period between the 11th and 18th centuries CE (Mallinson & Singleton, 2017).

This paper aims to investigate whether mindfulness has Vedic antecedents and influences. The focus will be on the eastern school of secular mindfulness, as popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn through his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program.

## 2. Sources

The primary sources on mindfulness were specifically limited to the works of Jon Kabat-Zinn. These sources include published books, academic papers, and interviews available. Secondary sources were sourced through Google Scholar and various internet search engines to provide additional context and information.

For sources of the Vedic tradition, the focus was restricted to two main schools: *Advaita Vedānta* of the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Yoga* systems, namely, *Yoga* of *Patañjali* and *Haṭha Yoga*. This restriction is justified by Kabat-Zinn's own references to *Vedānta* and *Yoga*, as well as influential figures such as Jiddu Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Swami Chinmayananda, Ken Wilber, and Ramana Maharishi, who are primarily associated with *Advaita* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

The primary textual sources for *Advaita Vedānta* include the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma Sūtra* of *Bādarāyana*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Additionally, the commentaries of the 8<sup>th</sup> century *Advaita Vedānta* teacher, *Śaṅkara*, on these texts and the writings of his lineage were incorporated. For the *Yoga* tradition, relevant texts include the *Yoga Sūtras* of *Patañjali* and its commentaries, as well as *Haṭha Yoga* texts.

These sources provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the philosophical and practical aspects

of the Vedic traditions as they relate to mindfulness.

## 3. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a distinctive form of secular meditation popularized by Kabat-Zinn and detailed in his seminal book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, first published in 1990. This book outlines the original secular mindfulness program known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Following the success of MBSR, a second mindfulness-based clinical program called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed, which fused the principles of MBSR and Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (ICS). The success of these programs led to the creation of numerous other mindfulness-based interventions tailored to various needs and outcomes.

In the Pāli language, mindfulness is termed *sati*, which literally translates to 'memory.' In Buddhism, *sati* is a fundamental element of the Noble Eightfold Path, specifically known as *sammā sati* or 'right mindfulness.' The term 'mindfulness' as a translation for *sati* was first introduced into English by Rhys Davids in 1891 (Hwang & Kearney, 2015). The Sanskrit and Vedic counterpart to the Pāli term *sati* is *smṛti*, which carries a similar meaning. Additionally, the term *anusmṛti*, a variant of 'smṛti,' appears in the Vedic text, *Brahma Sūtra* (2.2.25).

*Smṛti*, which literally translates to 'that which is remembered,' is not only associated with memory, as noted in the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (4.110) and the *Yoga Sūtra* (1.20), but is also regarded as a meditative practice, as referenced in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.73) and the *Tattvavaiśārādī* (1.20). In these sources, *smṛti* is understood as mindful recollection, where spiritual insights are integrated into one's awareness, facilitating a deeper state of awareness. This practice highlights the continuity between memory and mindfulness, suggesting that mindful recollection is a key aspect of spiritual practice in Vedic traditions.

## 4. Definition and Key Descriptors

When investigating the origins of secular mindfulness, it is crucial to examine the definitions provided by Kabat-Zinn, who is widely recognized as the pioneer of secular mindfulness (Felipe & Knight, 2010; Crane et al., 2017). Given Kabat-Zinn's central role in the development of secular mindfulness, an analysis of his definitions is essential for understanding the foundational concepts underlying this practice.

In Kabat-Zinn's body of work, numerous definitions of mindfulness have been articulated. The following

selected definitions provide insight into how mindfulness is conceptualized by its principal innovator:

1. Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4).
2. Mindfulness meditation is a consciousness discipline revolving around a particular way of paying attention in one's life. It can be most simply described as the intentional cultivation of non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1996, p.161).
3. To simply "drop in" on the actuality of [one's] lived experience and then to sustain it as best [one] can moment by moment, with intentional openhearted presence and suspension of judgment and distraction (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.148).
4. The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145).
5. "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally," "And then I sometimes add, in the service of self-understanding and wisdom" (Kabat-Zinn, 2017).

Kabat-Zinn's definitions of mindfulness meditation consistently emphasize several core elements: purposefulness, present-moment awareness, focused attention, a non-judgmental stance, and simple awareness. These definitions collectively stress mindfulness meditation as a deliberate practice involving attentive engagement with the present moment, while consciously avoiding judgments.

In his recent definition, Kabat-Zinn (2017) introduces self-understanding and wisdom as outcomes of mindfulness practice. This addition highlights a nuanced aspect of his perspective, wherein mindfulness is not solely about the immediate practice of awareness but also encompasses the development of deeper self-insight and wisdom over time.

Examining Kabat-Zinn's definitions reveals a consistent emphasis on 'awareness' as a central outcome of mindfulness practices. According to his framework, awareness is cultivated through purposeful and non-judgmental attention to the present moment. This process of attentive engagement facilitates an understanding of oneself and contributes to the

acquisition of wisdom (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1996). Kabat-Zinn further posits that the resultant awareness enhances self-knowledge and fosters wisdom, reinforcing the idea that mindfulness is a transformative practice with both immediate and long-term benefits (Kabat-Zinn, 2017).

Other scholars and researchers have proposed various definitions of mindfulness by identifying its numerous mechanisms and components. These secondary definitions of mindfulness often build upon the foundational ideas presented by Kabat-Zinn, with limited innovation. Bishop et al. (2004) synthesized these definitions, identifying two core components: the self-regulation of attention related to the present moment and an orientation toward one's experiences characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance. Building on this, Garland, Froeliger, & Howard (2014) proposed that mindfulness practices consist of two primary components: 'focused attention' and 'open monitoring.' Further refinement of the definition came from Houlihan and Brewer (2016), who emphasized the importance of maintaining attention and adopting an attitude of acceptance. Complementing this, a review by Kathirasan and Rai (2023) conceptualized mindfulness as encompassing awareness, acceptance, and attention. In this model, awareness is seen as the outcome of mindfulness practices, integrating both attention and acceptance.

#### 4.1. Awareness

The concept of awareness, which is the primary outcome of mindfulness practices, holds a pivotal role in Vedic systems of praxis and philosophy. In Vedic thought, awareness is expressed through terms such as *caitanya*, *cit*, *jñāna*, *sākṣi*, *apramāda*, and *apramatta*. These terms, often translated into English as consciousness, awareness, knowledge, vigilance, and witnessing consciousness, capture various facets of awareness within Vedic traditions. In Vedic literature, consciousness and awareness are frequently treated as synonymous, reflecting the intrinsic connection between these concepts.

Within Vedic systems, awareness is typically classified into two categories: dual and non-dual. Dualistic awareness is associated with the *Sāṅkhya* school of philosophy and the *Patañjali Yoga* system. In these frameworks, a clear distinction is made between the observer and the observed. For example, the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy introduces the concepts of *puruṣa* (the passive observer) and *prakṛti* (the dynamic reality), suggesting a separation between consciousness and the changing universe (*Sāṅkhya Kārika* 19, 65). This idea of a

detached observer is also present in the *Yoga Sūtras* of *Patañjali*, where the term *draṣṭṛ* represents the seer or observer of all experiences (*Yoga Sūtra* 1.3, 2.17). This dualistic perspective presents the separation between consciousness and the objects of experience, aligning with the *Sāṅkhya* view of an independent, non-intervening observer.

In contrast, non-dual awareness, or consciousness as articulated in *Advaita Vedānta*, emphasizes the oneness of consciousness, self, and reality. This perspective posits that true understanding comes from recognizing that consciousness and the self are not separate but inherently unified. This perspective is derived from the *Upaniṣads* and is further developed in the commentarial traditions. Here, awareness is seen as an undivided and homogeneous reality that transcends the distinctions between observer and observed. Key texts that support this view include the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (3.3), the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.3.9, 4.3.14, 4.3.6), the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.2.15), the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.2.10), and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.14). The *Brahma Sūtra* also elaborates on this concept (2.1.4, 1.1.5, 1.1.9, 1.1.10, 3.2.16), as does the *Bhagavad Gītā* (5.24, 9.9, 9.18, 13.17, 13.33, 14.6). Notably, the idea of the witness, or *sākṣi*, is explicitly presented in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.11) and is also further explored in the *Drṣṭvya Viveka* (17, 24), which presents non-dual awareness as the indivisible reality beyond the dichotomy of subject and object.

The concept of vigilance or metacognition is presented as *apramāda* or *apramatta* in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.3.11), *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.2.4), *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* (2.10.18.3), and *Mahābhārata* (5.42.5, (5.43.19, 21). The *Mahābhārata* states that the observance of vigilance conduces to truth, meditation, concentration, curiosity, dispassion, non-stealing, continence, and non-possession (5.43.19).

## 4.2. Attention

The concept of attention, a core component of mindfulness, is extensively explored in Vedic literature, especially the *Yoga* and *Haṭha Yoga* systems. In Sanskrit, attention is represented by terms such as *dhyāna*, *dhāraṇā*, *samādhi*, *upāsanā*, *samāhita*, and *samādhāna*, which are generally translated as attention, absorption, meditation, or concentration.

The term *dhāraṇā*, meaning sustained attention or concentration, is prominently featured in classical *Yoga* texts. For instance, it is described in the *Yoga Sūtra* (2.53, 3.1) as a key aspect of meditative practice. *Dhāraṇā* is also referenced in texts such as the *Vasiṣṭha Samhitā*

(1.37, 4.1-5), *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (2.37), *Gorakṣaśataka* (4, 67-75, 96), *Gherandasamhitā* (3.2, 3.59-63), *Yogacūḍāmaṇi Upaniṣad* (107, 110, 112), *Dhyānabindu Upaniṣad* (41), *Kṣurikā Upaniṣad* (1, 2, 13, 18), *Varāha Upaniṣad* (5.12), and the *Nāḍabindu Upaniṣad* (8).

The concept of *dhyāna*, often translated as "meditation," appears frequently in *Yoga* and Vedic literature. Notable mentions include the *Yoga Sūtra* (3.2), *Gherandasamhitā* (2.11, 6.1, 6.14-18, 6.20-21), *Gorakṣaśataka* (76-77), *Vasiṣṭha Samhitā* (1.33-37, 4.19), *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (2.38), *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* (3.2), *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.8), *Brahma Sūtra* (4.1.8), and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.39, 6.25-26).

Similarly, the concept of *samādhi*—a critical aspect of attentional practice leading to absorption and mental one-pointedness—is discussed in the *Brahma Sūtra* (2.3.39), *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* (6.18), *Yoga Sūtra* (1.20, 1.46, 1.51, 2.2, 2.29, 2.45, 3.3, 4.1, 4.5-7), *Gherandasamhitā* (1.11, 3.30, 3.42, 4.82, 7.1, 7.3, 7.8, 7.15, 7.21), *Haṭhapradīpikā* (3.121, 4.2-8, 4.81, 4.108-109, 4.111), *Varāha Upaniṣad* (2.75), *Darśana Upaniṣad* (10.5), *Amṛtanāda Upaniṣad* (16), *Vasiṣṭha Samhitā* (4.57-66), and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.44, 2.53, 4.24). These texts highlight the significance of *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi* in meditation and attentional focus within Vedic systems.

The term *samādhāna* (or sometimes *samāhita*) is highlighted as one of six essential mental accomplishments for undertaking the inquiry into self-nature, as outlined in the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.23). This concept, defined as *citta ekāgratā* (one-pointedness of the mind) and *citta naiścalya* (a mind free from distractions), is further elaborated in *Advaita Vedānta* texts such as the *Sarvavedānta Siddhāntasāra Saṅgraha* (218-225), *Tattvabodha* (p.29), *Vivekacūḍāmaṇī* (26), *Aparokṣānubhūti* (8), and *Vedāntasāra* (23). *Dhāraṇā*, *samādhāna*, and in some interpretations, *samādhi*, are also characterized by the nature of bare attention.

Early forms of meditation found in the *Vedas* were known as *upāsanā*, which emerged as a distinct practice within Vedic systems. *Śaṅkara* defined *upāsanā* as focused meditation on a single concept derived from the scriptures. This is elucidated in his commentaries, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* (12.3), where he discusses meditative practice on the supreme reality as presented in the scriptures. *Śaṅkara's* interpretations in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* (Introduction) and the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* (1.3.9) further expand on *upāsanā*, describing it as meditation centred on a singular philosophical idea, thereby integrating scriptural insights into the meditative process. These forms of contemplation can be further categorized into various types, such as *sampat*, *adhyāsa*, *pratika*, and

*pratimā* (Gambhirananda, 1997). *Dhyāna* is sometimes characterized as *upāsana* when insights or contemplative reflections become the focus or content of meditation.

### 4.3. Acceptance

The concept of acceptance, often characterized by equanimity or non-reactivity towards stimuli and experiences, is integral to early Vedic literature. Compared to attention, which is a central focus in *Yoga* systems, acceptance is more prominently emphasized in *Advaita Vedānta* literature. In Sanskrit, acceptance is represented by terms such as *samatva* and *titikṣā*. For instance, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.48, 2.48, 5.18, 6.9, 6.29, 9.9, 14.23, 14.25), the importance of maintaining *samatva* or equanimity in the face of contrasting experiences—such as success and failure, pleasure and pain—is highlighted as a fundamental aspect of spiritual practice and the state of being liberated. Similarly, the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* (6) reflects on acceptance within a broader context of embracing a holistic approach to life. The *Upaniṣad* suggests that wisdom involves accepting all negative experiences such as hatred and grief as part of a unified whole.

The concept of *titikṣā*, or forbearance, is more explicitly discussed within *Advaita Vedānta* literature. *Titikṣā* is defined as the capacity to endure or withstand challenges with patience and composure, embodying a resilient form of acceptance. This quality is recognized as one of the six essential mental accomplishments, known as *ṣaṭka sampatti*, necessary for an aspirant engaged in self-inquiry. The *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.23) lists *titikṣā* as a crucial attribute for those pursuing knowledge of the self, suggesting that it is fundamental for overcoming obstacles and achieving deeper understanding. Further elaboration on *titikṣā* is found in the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* (1.1.1), which discusses it in the context of self-inquiry. The significance of *titikṣā* is highlighted in almost all foundational texts of *Advaita Vedānta* called *prakaraṇa granthas*. Texts such as the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇī* (24), *Tattvabodha* (p.25), *Aparokṣānubhūti* (7), and *Vedāntasāra* (22) provide additional insights into the concept. These texts emphasize that *titikṣā* is not merely about passive endurance but involves an active engagement with mental disciplines that facilitate self-inquiry. By cultivating *titikṣā*, practitioners can develop the patience and composure necessary for effective self-inquiry and achieving the understanding of the self.

### 4.4. Wisdom, Self-Understanding and Psychological Freedom

The outcomes of mindfulness practices—often described as wisdom, psychological freedom, and self-understanding—are articulated through specific technical terms in Vedic literature. These concepts are central to both *Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* traditions, where they convey the states of realization, enlightenment, and liberation attained through spiritual practice. In both systems, this is regarded as the ultimate goal of life, with all practices aimed at achieving this highest state of freedom.

In the context of wisdom, the Sanskrit terms *prajñā* and *vijñāna* are frequently used. Both terms refer to profound insight and understanding. These concepts are prominently featured in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where they are associated with wisdom in verses such as 2.11, 2.57–58, 2.61, 2.67–68, 6.8, and 7.2. Additionally, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.1.14) references *prajñā*. These texts emphasize the role of wisdom in achieving clarity and insight, which are crucial for attaining liberating insight.

For psychological freedom, the terms *mukti*, *mokṣa*, and *kaivalya* are used interchangeably in Vedic literature. Both *mukti* and *mokṣa* refer to liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth, signifying a state of spiritual and psychological freedom. These terms are discussed in several *Yoga* texts, including the *Gherandasamhitā* (3.80), the *Yoga Sūtra Vyāsa Bhāṣya* (2.15, 2.18, 2.23–24, 3.26, 4.25), and the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (1.35, 3.101, 3.103, 4.15, 4.25, 4.30). The terms also appear in the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.3), *Mahābhārata* (5.173.15), *Manusmṛti* (6.35), and *Bhagavad Gītā* (5.28, 18.3), underscoring their significance across various texts.

The concept of self-understanding is articulated through the term *ātmajñāna* or *ātmavidyā*. *Ātmajñāna* refers to the knowledge or realization of the self, which is a central theme in *Advaita Vedānta* philosophy. This term is cited in the *Manusmṛti* (12.85) and the *Śiva Samhitā* (1.3, 1.39–40, 1.42), highlighting its importance in the context of liberation.

Collectively, these terms reflect the conceptual framework within Vedic literature that emphasizes wisdom, insight, liberation, and self-knowledge as central to attaining the ultimate goal of life.

## 5. Mindfulness as a Unique Type of Meditation

As extensively discussed by scholars and researchers, a fundamental characteristic of mindfulness is its distinctiveness as a form of meditation. Kabat-Zinn has made significant efforts to articulate and emphasize this uniqueness, distinguishing mindfulness from other meditation practices. To illustrate this aspect, the following quotations from Kabat-Zinn's works provide a clear representation of his perspective on mindfulness as a unique practice:

1. When we speak of meditation, it is important for you to know that this is not some weird cryptic activity, as our popular culture might have it. It does not involve becoming some kind of zombie, vegetable, self-absorbed narcissist, navel gazer, "space cadet," cultist, devotee, mystic, or Eastern philosopher. Meditation is simply about being yourself and knowing something about who that is. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.xv).
2. Mindfulness practice means that we commit fully in each moment to being present. There is no 'performance'. There is just this moment. We are not trying to improve or to get anywhere else (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.22).
3. When it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you wind up doing, that's what you've wound up doing. Whatever you are thinking about right now, that's what's on your mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.xiii).
4. Meditation is the only intentional, systematic human activity which at bottom is about not trying to improve yourself or get anywhere else, but simply to realize where you already are." (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.14).
5. There is truly no place else to go (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.94).
6. That doesn't mean that every moment you practice will be a moment of timelessness. That depends on the degree of concentration and calmness that you bring to each moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.466).

The quotations provided highlight a fundamental aspect of mindfulness meditation: it does not involve the expectation of achieving a state of mental stillness or blankness. Instead, it lies in its accessibility and applicability at any time or place, regardless of ongoing thoughts or mental activity.

Kabat-Zinn articulates this principle by emphasizing that mindfulness is not about transforming one's

mental state into one of absolute calm or emptiness. Rather, mindfulness involves maintaining a consistent, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. This approach acknowledges that thoughts and mental activity are natural and inevitable aspects of human experience.

Further, Kabat-Zinn addresses common misconceptions about mindfulness meditation, noting that a prevalent but mistaken belief is that meditation requires the complete cessation of thought and the attainment of a serene, still state of mind. He argues that such perceptions are misguided, as mindfulness fundamentally involves cultivating an awareness that embraces all experiences—including thoughts—without the need to alter or escape them. Consequently, mindfulness is always accessible and can be practiced irrespective of the mental noise or distractions that may be present.

He elaborates on this misconception by stating:

"It is not uncommon for people who know little of meditation except what they have gleaned from the media to harbor the notion that meditation is basically a willful inward manipulation, akin to throwing a switch in your brain, that results in your mind going completely blank. No more thought, no more worry. You are catapulted into the "meditative" state, which is always one of deep relaxation, peace, calm, and insight, often associated with concepts of "nirvana" in the public's mind. This notion is a serious, if totally understandable, misperception." (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p.59)

Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness meditation thus emphasizes its distinctive feature: the practice is not about achieving a state of mental blankness or transformation but about sustaining an attentive and accepting awareness of the present moment, irrespective of ongoing thoughts or mental states. Kabat-Zinn's approach is different from the *Yoga* systems where the stilling of thoughts or the absence of thoughts is often stated to be the goal of the system (Kathirasan & Rai, 2023). However, Kabat-Zinn's conceptualization of mindfulness as a state of non-doing or non-striving bears a closer resemblance to concepts in *Advaita Vedānta* than to those in *Yoga* systems. In his works, he describes mindfulness as a state of being where one is not actively trying to achieve or change anything, but rather, simply observes the

present moment without interference or effort. This depiction closely aligns with the *Advaita Vedānta* classification of meditation, which includes two distinct categories: *vastu tantram* and *puruṣa tantram*.

Meditation is seen as *vastu tantram* where the practitioner's sense of agency or choice is not applicable, as the practice relies on the presence of the Self, the object of meditation, which is inherently constant and ever-present. The Self is also of the nature of non-doing, actionless or *akarta* (*Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 4.32). This concept is emphasized by Śaṅkara, who differentiates between *vastu tantram* and *puruṣa tantram* in texts such as the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* (1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.4), the *Upadeśasāhasri* (1.1.13), and also presented in the *Pañcadaśī* by Vidyāranya (9.74–82). As such, this form of meditation is also referred to as *prāptasya prāpti*, or the realization of what is already accomplished (*Vedāntaparibhāṣā* 9.10). In this type of meditation, the practitioner does not exert effort or exercise will; instead, they engage with the realization that the object of meditation, the Self, is already attained and accessible and therefore does not require any 'doing.'

In contrast, *puruṣa tantram* involves a meditation practice where the will and effort of the practitioner play a role in achieving the desired outcome, a concept central to the *Yoga* systems. This type of meditation requires active engagement, choice, and striving. Therefore, while *vastu tantram* represents a non-striving state of abiding in awareness, *puruṣa tantram* involves a more deliberate and effortful approach to meditation.

Overall, Kabat-Zinn's portrayal of mindfulness as non-doing mirrors the principles of *vastu tantram* in *Advaita Vedānta*, highlighting a shared emphasis on the inherent presence and accessibility of mindfulness, free from the exertion of personal will or effort. This concept of *vastu tantram* is evident in various Vedic texts. The following Vedic literature illustrates this principle:

1. *Pratibodha viditam matam* – This phrase, found in the *Kena Upaniṣad* (2.4), translates to "It is known in every cognition." It signifies that the essence of awareness or understanding is inherently present in every act of cognition, reflecting a state that does not require effortful striving.
2. *Yatra yatra mano yāti tatra tatra parāmṛtam* – Found in the *Sarasvatirahasya Upaniṣad* (2.31), this verse translates to "Wherever your mind goes, there is immortality." This suggests that the state of awareness or realization is ever-present,

regardless of where the mind directs its attention, indicating a non-striving approach.

3. *Yatra yatra manoyāti tatra tatra samādhīḥ* – This verse from the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (116) means "Wherever your mind goes, there is *samādhi*." It conveys that *samādhi*, or meditative absorption, is available wherever the mind focuses, highlighting a continuous and accessible state of awareness.
4. *Yatra yatra manoyāti tatra tatra samādhayaḥ* – As stated in the *Dṛg Dṛśya Viveka* (30), "Wherever your mind goes, there is *samādhi*." This reinforces the same idea expressed in the previous verse.

These references collectively point out meditation in the *Advaita Vedānta* as a contemplation of the inherent state of awareness that transcends the need for active effort or control, embodying the principles of *vastu tantram*. Interestingly, Kabat-Zinn's 1994 book title, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, echoes this concept. This perspective emphasises that thoughts themselves are not obstacles to achieving mindfulness, reflecting a key tenet of the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition. In contrast, the *Yoga* systems often emphasize the removal or transcendence of thoughts, akin to the stilling of the mind as articulated in the *Yoga Sūtra* (1.2) and *Haṭhapradīpikā* (4.6-7).

The references to this Vedic idea of inherent awareness suggest that the ultimate goal of liberation is present within every cognitive process, asserting that thoughts are not inherently problematic. This notion is distinct from the *Yoga* systems, which focus on techniques to still or sublate thoughts, aiming to achieve a state of mental tranquillity and control. Additionally, Kabat-Zinn's notion of meditation as simply knowing or being oneself resonates with similar concepts found in the Vedic texts (*Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 18.52; *Yogayājñavalkya* 9.5-9).

These connections highlight a shared philosophical undercurrent between Kabat-Zinn's interpretations and traditional *Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* systems, emphasizing the intrinsic accessibility of mindfulness and liberation in every moment.

## 6. Philosophical Underpinnings of Mindfulness

The philosophical underpinnings of mindfulness are often underemphasized in research literature, particularly among those who focus on measuring the effects and outcomes of mindfulness practices. While the focus on empirical validation has greatly contributed to the widespread acceptance and

recognition of mindfulness, the emphasis has largely been on practical aspects and measurable outcomes, rather than on the foundational philosophy that underpins these practices.

A closer examination of Kabat-Zinn's writings reveals that philosophy plays a crucial role in shaping his approach to secular mindfulness (Kathirasan and Rai, 2023). While the relationship between philosophical principles and the specific outcomes or benefits of mindfulness practices may not be extensively documented, the philosophical framework profoundly influences Kabat-Zinn's perspective and his appreciation of human wholeness. Kabat-Zinn explicitly acknowledges the importance of this philosophical dimension throughout his works, and these ideas are intricately woven into his meditation practices, sometimes represented through metaphors.

To illustrate Kabat-Zinn's philosophical outlook, the following selected quotations from his works reflect his underlying vision of self-nature:

1. Although our patients all come with various problems, diagnoses, and ailments, we make every effort to apprehend their intrinsic wholeness (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p.292)
2. We are also what was present before the scarring — our original wholeness, what was born whole. And we can reconnect with that intrinsic wholeness at any time, because its very nature is that it is always present. It is who we truly are. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.185)
3. When we are in touch with being whole, we feel at one with everything. When we feel at one with everything, we feel whole ourselves (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.226)
4. You are already whole, so there is nothing to do but be. (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.xxx)
5. We fragment ourselves to pursue chimera, often for years and decades at a stretch, and in the process, lose touch with or even betray at times our true nature, our sovereignty, the beauty of who we actually are, and our unfragmented, unfragmentable wholeness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p.336)
6. The price of wholeness is nothing less than a total commitment to recognizing your intrinsic wholeness and an unswerving belief in your capacity to embody it in any moment. In our view, you are already perfect just as you are, in the sense of already being perfectly who you are, including all the imperfections. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.50)
7. While we may long for wholeness, the great irony is that it is already here in any and every moment,

and it is already ours. If we could realize this — that is, make it real in our lives — it would amount to a profound “rotation in consciousness,” a waking up to a deeper unity enveloping and permeating our whole life. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.71)

From the statements provided, three key ideas about the self's wholeness emerge, which are:

1. **Intrinsic Nature:** Wholeness is understood as an inherent aspect of human experience. It is viewed as a fundamental quality that exists within each individual, rather than something that must be acquired or achieved externally.
2. **Perpetual Availability:** Wholeness is always accessible. This notion implies that the experience of wholeness is not dependent on external conditions or specific circumstances; rather, it is perpetually available to individuals through their practice of mindfulness.
3. **Non-Duality/Oneness:** Wholeness is characterized by a sense of non-duality or oneness. This concept suggests that true understanding involves recognizing the unity and interconnectedness of all aspects of experience, rather than perceiving them as separate or distinct.

Kabat-Zinn does not engage in a dialectical discussion to elaborate on how these concepts directly relate to mindfulness practices. However, it is evident in his work that the mindfulness practices he advocates are designed to facilitate the realization of this intrinsic wholeness through practice and the generation of insights. By engaging in mindfulness, individuals may come to experience a deeper sense of unity and completeness within themselves.

Another notable aspect of Kabat-Zinn's philosophical perspective is that secular mindfulness is fundamentally life-affirming and positive. This view represents a departure from traditional Buddhist perspectives, which may not emphasize such an affirmative stance as prominently (Sharf, 2016; Shaw, 2020). This outlook highlights the belief that mindfulness practices are not only about addressing and managing stress or difficulties but also about embracing, savouring, and enhancing the richness of human experience. Through mindfulness, practitioners are encouraged to connect with and affirm their inherent wholeness, cultivating a positive and constructive approach to life.

This philosophical perspective on mindfulness is also rooted in the notion of human wholeness, characterized by three central ideas stated above: intrinsic nature,



perpetual availability, and non-duality. These concepts encapsulate his vision of the Self as complete and unfragmented and are articulated through the terms *pūrṇa* (wholeness or completeness) and *ananta* (limitlessness) within Vedic literature.

1. Intrinsic Nature: The concept that wholeness is inherent and fundamental to the Self is a recurring theme in various Vedic texts. For instance, the *Śiva Samhitā* (5.216, 5.211) emphasizes that the completeness of the Self is an intrinsic quality, inherent to its very nature. Similarly, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (5.1.1) reinforces this perspective, depicting the Self as intrinsically whole and complete.
2. Perpetual Availability: This concept suggests that wholeness or completeness is ever-present and unchanging. Vedic texts articulate this idea through various passages, such as the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1.1), which describes the Self as limitless and eternally present. Similarly, the *Brahma Sūtra* (3.2.37) and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) reinforce the notion of an eternal and unchanging essence.
3. Non-Duality: Non-duality suggests that true wholeness is characterized by the absence of dualistic distinctions, presenting a unified and indivisible reality. This principle is articulated in several key texts, such as the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1.1), which highlights the non-dual nature of the Self. Additionally, the *Brahma Sūtra* (3.2.37) and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) emphasize the limitless and indivisible essence of the Self.

Kabat-Zinn's interpretation of mindfulness, which encompasses attributes of intrinsic wholeness, perpetual accessibility, and non-duality, closely aligns with the *Advaita Vedānta* vision of the Self. This alignment shows Kabat-Zinn's alignment with *Advaita Vedānta* and its influential teacher *Śaṅkara*. *Śaṅkara* emphasized that the Self is always available and self-established, a perspective that resonates deeply with Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness (*Upadeśasāhasri* 2.2.93, 1.18.203; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 1.4.7, 4.3.18).

Through these principles, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practices can be viewed as an extension of the *Advaita Vedānta* perspective on the Self, emphasizing a path to realizing one's intrinsic wholeness and unity with reality. This understanding—that the Self is both limitless and non-dual—is central to *Advaita Vedānta* and serves as the foundation for its philosophical and experiential teachings Chattopadhyaya (2000). The

alignment of Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practices with these core concepts suggests that his approach is deeply informed by this ancient tradition, even as he adapts it for contemporary, secular contexts. From the acknowledgements in the first edition of *Full Catastrophe Living*, it is evident that Kabat-Zinn recognizes the influence of *Advaita Vedānta* and its teachers. He specifically acknowledges figures such as Swami Chinmayananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Ken Wilber, and Ram Dass, all of whom are deeply rooted in *Advaita* philosophy (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

## 7. Roots of Mindfulness

The origins of secular mindfulness are commonly attributed to Buddhism; however, Kabat-Zinn explicitly acknowledges his intentional distancing from Buddhist roots in his approach. Kabat-Zinn has pointed out that the historical Buddha himself would not have been considered a Buddhist in the conventional sense, and similarly, he does not align himself with any specific Buddhist identity (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Kabat-Zinn articulates his deliberate efforts to present mindfulness in a way that minimizes associations with Buddhism, New Age spirituality, Eastern mysticism, or any other potentially esoteric or ungrounded connotations (Booth, 2017). He states, "I bent over backwards to structure it and find ways to speak about it that avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist, new age, eastern mysticism or just plain flakey." This statement highlights his intention to make mindfulness accessible and relevant to a broad audience, free from the traditional Buddhist associations.

Kabat-Zinn reflects on his entry into mindfulness through a Zen framework, noting, "I got into this through the Zen door which is a very irreverent approach to Buddhism" (Booth, 2017). This comment emphasizes his pragmatic and non-traditional approach to integrating mindfulness into secular contexts, focusing on practical aspects while departing from conventional Buddhist practices.

Moreover, Kabat-Zinn acknowledges that his conceptualization of secular mindfulness extends beyond Buddhism, incorporating influences from various non-Buddhist Indian teachers and philosophical traditions. He explicitly cites the Yogic traditions, *Vedānta*, and notable figures such as Jiddu Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Vimala Thakar, and Ramana Maharishi as significant sources of inspiration (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth & Burney, 1985; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2011) and

Swami Chinmayananda (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). These influences, often overlooked or inadequately acknowledged in broader discussions of mindfulness, play a critical role in his approach as discussed above about his familiarity with *Advaita Vedānta* concepts.

Kabat-Zinn's recognition of these non-Buddhist sources is evident in his works. For example, he includes a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, a renowned *Advaita Vedānta* teacher, on the final page of his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) workbook and his book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. The quotation reads:

“By watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence.” (Maharaj, cited in Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.10)

In addition to Indian non-Buddhist sources, Kabat-Zinn also cites Taoism and Islamic Sufism as influential in shaping secular mindfulness. He notes the resonance of Taoist principles with mindfulness practices (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) and acknowledges connections to Islamic Sufism (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). These diverse influences contribute to the broader philosophical foundation of secular mindfulness, demonstrating that its roots are not confined to any single tradition but are instead enriched and continue to be enriched by a range of cultural and spiritual traditions.

## 8. Mindfulness Practices

The dimension of praxis is central to the curriculum of all Mindfulness-Based programs. Nearly all contemporary Mindfulness-Based programs are derived from the foundational model of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Therefore, a review of the mindfulness practices taught in MBSR, as developed by Kabat-Zinn and detailed in his work *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), is essential.

It is crucial to recognize that in mindfulness practices, elements such as the breath, bodily sensations, emotions, urges, thoughts and sensory perceptions are

employed to facilitate focused-attention and acceptance. These practices are designed to cultivate mindfulness by directing attention inward rather than toward external objects.

Kabat-Zinn (2013) enumerates the following mindfulness practices in *Full Catastrophe Living*: body scan, mindful *haṭha yoga*, sitting Meditation, walking meditation, mountain meditation, loving-kindness meditation, eating meditation, and raisin-eating exercise. Among these, the two formal practices—sitting meditation and mindful *haṭha yoga*—bear a resemblance to traditional *Yoga* practices.

In *Full Catastrophe Living*, several *āsana*-s (postures) from the modern *Haṭha Yoga* tradition are illustrated. Kabat-Zinn acknowledges that these practices have been borrowed from *Haṭha Yoga* systems, yet they are presented through the unique features of mindfulness. He stated that this adoption was inspired by his classes with John Lauder, his *Haṭha Yoga* teacher (Kabat-Zinn, 2021).

While the mindfulness practices outlined in Kabat-Zinn's MBSR framework include elements familiar from *Haṭha Yoga*, they are distinctively adapted to fit the mindfulness paradigm. His approach contrasts with the traditional *Haṭha Yoga* practice, which often involves different attitudes and mechanisms by promoting forcefulness and perfection in posture, qualities absent in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This adaptation highlights the integration of internal awareness to movement and mindfulness mechanisms, differentiating them from conventional *Haṭha Yoga* practices.

A notable feature of mindfulness is its emphasis on using the breath as an anchor for meditation and incorporating mindfulness into bodily awareness. This practice is described and guided in the Buddhist texts, such as the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. However, the use of breath or *prāṇa* as a meditative tool is not exclusive to Buddhist traditions; it also has a ubiquitous presence in the Vedic tradition.

In Vedic literature, particularly within the context of *Yoga*, breath regulation is a well-established practice known as *prāṇāyāma*. This practice is categorized into three primary components: *pūraka* (inhalation), *recaka* (exhalation), and *kumbhaka* (retention). Furthermore, the *Upaniṣads* also incorporate meditation on breath or *prāṇa* as a form of *upāsana* (contemplation). Specific references to breath-focused contemplation appear in several *Upaniṣads*, including the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.10.3, 7.26.1, 8.12.3, 3.14.2, 1.11.15, 3.14.2, 3.15.4, 3.17.6, 5.2.1-3, 6.5.2, 4; 6.6.3, 5; 6.7.1, 6.8.2, 7.15.1), the *Kaṭha*

*Upaniṣad* (2.2.3, 2.2.5, 2.3.2), the *Praśna Upaniṣad* (1.5–8, 2.2–13, 3.3, 3.11–12), the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.3.1, 3.3.1), the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.1.3, 2.2.8, 3.1.4, 3.1.9), the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.6.3, 2.1.6, 2.1.20, 2.3.6, 2.5.4, 3.4.1, 3.7.16, 3.9.9, 3.9.26, 4.1.3, 4.3.12, 4.4.18, 5.14.4), and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (1.5).

The practice of loving-kindness meditation, often associated with the Buddhist tradition, is prominently outlined in the *Metta Sutta*, a key text within the Buddhist canon. This meditation, known as *metta bhāvanā*, emphasizes the cultivation of unconditional love and compassion towards oneself and others, fostering a sense of universal benevolence.

In parallel, the concepts of kindness and compassion also appear in the Vedic systems. Peace prayers and the observance of non-injury also appear in the early Vedic texts (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.15.1; *Yajur Veda* 36.17). Vyāsa emphasises the importance of these virtues in his *Yoga Sūtra Bhāṣya*, asserting that the cultivation of kindness and compassion is essential to the practice of *Yoga* (*Yoga Sūtra Bhāṣya* 1.33, 3.23). In these verses, Vyāsa discusses how developing a mindset of friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity towards oneself and others is essential for achieving mental steadiness and spiritual progress.

Furthermore, the importance of compassion is also articulated by Śaṅkara in his *Upadeśasāhasri* (1.1.6), where he emphasizes that compassion and kindness are fundamental prerequisites for engaging in the tutelage of an enlightened teacher. According to him, these qualities are not merely ancillary but essential for a fruitful relationship between the disciple and the teacher.

Thus, while the *Metta Sutta* provides direct instruction on loving-kindness meditation within the Buddhist framework, the principles of kindness and compassion are similarly acknowledged and valued in the Vedic systems.

The practice of body scan meditation involves systematic attention to various parts of the body. This practice is employed to develop mindfulness and awareness of bodily sensations, facilitating relaxation, acceptance, and concentration. Kabat-Zinn states that he created this practice by combining the corpse pose (*śavāsana*) of *Haṭha Yoga* and *Vipassana*'s sweeping meditation (Kathirasan & Rai, 2023).

In the Vedic systems, relaxation and mindful awareness are also addressed, though often within different postural contexts. The *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* outlines relaxation as a significant component of meditative practice, specifically addressing postural considerations

in verses 4.1.8–9. Similarly, the *Yoga Sūtra* by Patañjali emphasizes the importance of a stable and comfortable posture, described in verse 2.46, which traditionally refers to a seated posture as essential for meditation.

However, the concept of relaxation extends beyond the seated posture in medieval *Haṭha Yoga*. The *Gherandasamhitā* (2.19) introduces the practice of mental relaxation in a supine posture. Further references to lying down meditation can be found in the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* (82) and the *Śiva Samhitā* (5.65, 5.70). These texts describe various meditative practices, including those performed in a supine position, as well as while walking, moving, and eating. These *Yoga* practices highlight the versatility of meditation, demonstrating that it can be cultivated across various physical states and activities.

## 9. Discussion

The exploration of Vedic antecedents to contemporary secular mindfulness reveals a noteworthy distinction in approaches to alleviating human suffering. Kabat-Zinn's secular mindfulness program adopts a fundamentally positive orientation toward addressing human distress, contrasting sharply with the more pessimistic perspective traditionally associated with early Buddhist doctrine.

According to Sharf (2015), early Buddhism is characterized by three key tenets: (1) life is intrinsically bound with suffering, (2) the only genuine remedy for suffering is complete escape from *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and rebirth), and (3) such an escape necessitates relinquishing the hope of achieving happiness within this world. This perspective is often interpreted as a pessimistic view of human existence, a sentiment that Varma (1973) supports by describing Buddhism as a doctrine grounded in pessimism. In this framework, the ultimate goal is not to improve one's experience within the world but to discard it entirely.

Conversely, Kabat-Zinn's approach to addressing human distress is markedly different from traditional Buddhist perspectives. His secular framework does not adopt a pessimistic outlook but instead emphasizes a positive, life-affirming stance toward the present moment and one's experiences within it. Additionally, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness is accompanied by a body-positive outlook, where the body is viewed as an integral part of the meditative experience, rather than something to be transcended or detached from. This approach aligns more closely with certain Vedic traditions, particularly those found in *Tantra* and *Haṭha Yoga* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. These traditions advocate a positive approach to

suffering and spiritual growth, focusing on engagement with the world and responsible action rather than renunciation.

For instance, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna counsels Arjuna to embrace his duty as a warrior and act responsibly, rather than withdrawing from the battlefield. This guidance reflects a philosophy of active participation in life and the fulfilment of one's responsibilities as a means of spiritual and personal development. A substantial portion of Chapter 2 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is dedicated to elucidating key attributes of *Karma Yoga*, featuring awareness, attention, and acceptance. These elements are portrayed as essential for effectively engaging in one's duties while preparing for liberating insight through self-understanding. Śāṅkara's commentaries on this chapter reinforce these ideas, echoing the notion that acceptance (*Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 2.48) and responsible action (*Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 2.50) are integral to overcoming suffering and achieving liberation. Thus, Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness, with its emphasis on positive engagement and present-moment awareness, resonates with these Vedic traditions, highlighting a shared understanding of how mindfulness can be utilized to enhance human well-being and alleviate suffering. This is understandable, given that in the first edition of *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat-Zinn acknowledges the *Bhagavad Gītā* and one of its most renowned teachers, Swami Chinmayananda, as influences.

The notion of a unified and holistic human personality stands in contrast to certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy, which traditionally views personality as an assemblage of transient elements rather than an integrated whole. In Buddhism, particularly early Buddhism, the self is perceived as a collection of processes and phenomena, and the emphasis is often placed on renunciation and detachment from the self and worldly existence. This renunciatory approach aims to transcend personal attachments and desires, leading to liberation from suffering, called *nirvāṇa*.

In stark contrast, the *Advaita Vedānta* system, particularly as articulated in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, promotes a more inclusive view of human wholeness. *Advaita Vedānta* advocates two distinct lifestyles: *Sāṅkhya Yoga* and *Karma Yoga* (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.3). *Sāṅkhya Yoga* is generally associated with the path of renunciation, practiced by renunciates and ascetics who seek to detach from the material world and pursue liberation through self-inquiry. *Karma Yoga*, as outlined in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (3.3), is taught for individuals who are actively engaged in worldly life and responsibilities,

emphasizing action performed with mindfulness and without attachment to the results.

Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness approach, which focuses on enhancing self-awareness through attentiveness and accepting experiences with equanimity, aligns closely with the principles of *Karma Yoga*. His emphasis on engaging with the present moment, embracing experiences as they are, and maintaining a balanced perspective resonates with the teachings of *Karma Yoga*. This approach mirrors the guidance provided in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and is reflected in Śāṅkara's commentary on the text. Thus, while Buddhism traditionally advocates for a form of detachment and renunciation, *Advaita Vedānta* offers a framework that integrates mindfulness into everyday life through the practice of *Karma Yoga*. Kabat-Zinn's approach, therefore, can be seen as harmonizing with these teachings by promoting a mindful and balanced engagement with one's experiences and responsibilities.

The concept of non-duality, as advanced by Kabat-Zinn, presents an intriguing contrast with the Buddhist understanding of the same term. In the context of Buddhism, the notion of *advaya*—often translated as "non-duality"—is primarily associated with the middle path, a framework that emphasizes transcending the extremes of existence and non-existence, rather than directly addressing the non-duality of the self and the external world (Darling, 1987). This Buddhist interpretation of non-duality is more concerned with balancing and integrating opposing aspects of experience rather than asserting a fundamental oneness of self and external reality.

In contrast, Kabat-Zinn's philosophy of non-duality seems to draw significantly from the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition, which presents a more explicit conception of non-duality as the fundamental unity between the self (*ātman*) and the absolute reality (*brahman*). This perspective posits that the apparent distinctions between self and the external world are just that—apparent—and true understanding comes from recognizing the underlying oneness of all existence. Kabat-Zinn's engagement with non-duality and wholeness appears to be influenced by the teachings of *Advaita Vedānta*, particularly through the works of prominent teachers such as Ramana Maharishi, Ken Wilber, Swami Chinmayananda, and Nisargadatta Maharaj, whose writings and teachings emphasize this kind of non-dual awareness.

Kabat-Zinn himself acknowledges these sources as influences on his work, which suggests that his interpretation of non-duality aligns more closely with the *Advaita Vedānta* system rather than the Buddhist

framework. This divergence in the conceptualization of non-duality highlights a broader discussion about the relationship between secular mindfulness and traditional Buddhist practices.

While Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness incorporates elements of non-duality, it is significantly shaped by the *Advaita Vedānta* system, offering a perspective that diverges from the Buddhist concept of non-duality, or *advaya*. It is also worth noting that his approach bears greater resemblance to Zen Buddhism than to early Buddhist doctrine (Kathirasan & Rai, 2023).

These philosophical considerations significantly influence Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness, imparting a distinctive character to his methodology for alleviating suffering. Unlike traditional frameworks that may focus primarily on renunciative or monastic practices, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness integrates principles from *Advaita Vedānta*, shaping its application in a manner that broadens its accessibility and relevance.

In Kabat-Zinn's framework, mindfulness is not limited to those who lead a monastic or ascetic lifestyle. Instead, it is presented as a practice that can benefit individuals engaged in the complexities of everyday life, mirroring the inclusive approach already found in American Buddhism (Gleig, 2019). This inclusive approach reflects a departure from conventional views that often associate mindfulness with solitude and withdrawal from worldly activities.

For instance, in Kabat-Zinn's interpretation, figures like Arjuna from the *Bhagavad Gītā*—a warrior prince actively engaged in the battlefield—could be seen as ideal candidates for mindfulness training. This perspective contrasts with the traditional view that associates mindfulness primarily with monks or renunciates, who are dedicated to renunciation and asceticism. By framing mindfulness as a practice suitable for individuals immersed in dynamic and challenging environments, Kabat-Zinn emphasizes its practical applicability and transformative potential for a broader range of practitioners.

Thus, Kabat-Zinn's adaptation of mindfulness, influenced by *Advaita Vedānta* and other philosophical traditions, reshapes the practice from a largely contemplative or ascetic exercise into a versatile tool for personal growth and stress relief in the context of everyday life. This approach not only redefines who can benefit from mindfulness but also highlights its role in enhancing the quality of life across diverse settings.

Kabat-Zinn's endeavour to present mindfulness as a distinctive form of meditation bears a notable resemblance to the concept of *vastu tantram* in *Advaita Vedānta*. His approach can be seen as an adaptation of practices such as *nididhyāsana* (embodiment) and *manana* (reasoning), wherein non-dual awareness itself becomes the focal point of meditation. This adaptation aligns with the non-striving nature of mindfulness, echoing the principles of *vastu tantram* where the practice emphasizes a state of being rather than active effort or doing.

In *Advaita Vedānta*, *nididhyāsana* and *manana* involve deep contemplation and reflection on the Self as pure consciousness, with the aim of understanding and experiencing its inherent wholeness. These practices follow *śravana*—the attentive listening to teachings from a guru or teacher. However, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practice diverges from these traditional methods by not incorporating the detailed aspects of *manana*, *nididhyāsana* or *śravana* that cultivate and embody the Self's wholeness as a liberating insight. Instead, Kabat-Zinn innovatively integrates elements of yogic concentration, postural practice with *Advaita Vedānta*'s metaphysical insights, presenting mindfulness as a practical and accessible form of meditation that emphasizes presence and awareness without striving or specific philosophical undertones. This approach is not something alien to *Advaita Vedānta* as the use of yogic concentration is already viewed as something compatible in texts like the *Vedāntasāra* (200, 214), *Gūḍhārtha Dīpikā* (ch 6) and the *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* (6.1).

Thus, while Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practice reflects an adaptation of traditional concepts, it introduces the *Advaita Vedānta* approach by blending yogic concentration techniques with metaphysical principles. This synthesis results in a unique meditation practice that maintains the essence of non-striving and awareness as central components, while also offering a contemporary interpretation suited for modern applications.

Kabat-Zinn's portrayal of mindfulness as a pathway to self-understanding and wisdom is intrinsically connected to the soteriological approach of *Advaita Vedānta*, where self-knowledge and wisdom are fundamentally interrelated as means and ends. *Advaita Vedānta* holds that the knowledge of the Self is not merely a preliminary step but the sole means to attain wisdom (*vijñāna* or *prajñā*). Self-understanding or *ātmajñāna* is regarded as the essential pathway to achieving liberation. This involves an understanding of the Self's true nature as consciousness, beyond the

transient phenomena of the empirical world. It is through this realization that one attains *vijñāna*, the penultimate wisdom that brings about liberation.

Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practice, with its focus on self-awareness and understanding, resonates with this traditional view by emphasizing the cultivation of inner insight and self-understanding. His approach aligns with the *Advaita Vedānta* perspective, where mindfulness serves as a practical tool for deepening self-knowledge and thereby facilitating the attainment of liberating insight. Thus, Kabat-Zinn's vision of mindfulness appears to be more than a modern psychological technique, with deep roots in the ancient soteriological aim of *Advaita Vedānta*.

Kabat-Zinn's secular mindfulness practices are also significantly influenced by *Hatha Yoga* and *Patañjali Yoga* systems. For instance, the use of breath as an anchor in mindfulness practice is not unique to Buddhism; rather, it has its roots in Vedic *upāsana*s, which are extensively detailed in the *Upaniṣad*-s. Furthermore, various aspects of Kabat-Zinn's approach, including sitting meditation, body scan, standing *Yoga*, and loving-kindness meditation, demonstrate substantial adaptation and innovation drawn from *Yoga* systems as well as Buddhist ones.

Sitting meditation, a core practice of mindfulness, has its roots in the meditative practices of *Hatha Yoga*, *Upaniṣads*, and *Patañjali Yoga*, where disciplined postures and breath control are essential. The body scan technique, which involves systematically focusing on different parts of the body, resembles the *śavāsana* practice in *Hatha Yoga* and integrates elements from *Vipassana*'s sweeping meditation. Similarly, standing mindful *Yoga* practices, involving physical postures and movements, can be traced back to traditional *Hatha Yoga*, where physical and meditative elements are combined.

Loving-kindness meditation, while a prominent practice in Buddhism, also finds resonance in Vedic teachings on compassion and kindness. The *Vedas*, along with the works of *Vyāsa* and *Śaṅkara*, emphasize the cultivation of virtues like compassion as essential prerequisites for spiritual development.

To understand what renders Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness secular despite its influences from Buddhism, *Advaita Vedānta*, and *Yoga*, it is crucial to consider several key aspects that delineate its secular nature.

Firstly, the foremost distinguishing feature is the absence of religious faith and dogma within Kabat-Zinn's framework. Unlike traditional spiritual practices, which are often embedded in religious doctrines and

cosmologies, Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness practice is rooted in empirical and scientific principles rather than spiritual beliefs. He argues that the empirical dimensions of mindfulness practices can be distilled from their spiritual origins, making them accessible and applicable to a broader audience (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This approach effectively separates the practice from its religious and metaphysical contexts while providing appropriate acknowledgments.

Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness deliberately omits the theistic elements of Vedic traditions. These elements, which include beliefs in concepts such as *pāpa* (sin), *puṇya* (virtue), *īśvara* (god), and other super-sensuous entities or realms like heavens and hells, are integral to many religious practices, including Buddhism, but are grounded in faith rather than empirical evidence. A similar trend can be observed in American Buddhism, which has been criticized for selectively adopting aspects of Buddhism that align with American cultural values while disregarding those that do not (Wilson, 2014). By stripping these elements from mindfulness practice, Kabat-Zinn creates a framework that emphasizes practical and observable benefits without requiring adherence to any religious doctrine. This approach broadens the accessibility of mindfulness, allowing more people to engage with the practice and potentially overcome their suffering, regardless of their spiritual or religious beliefs (Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

From a philosophical perspective, Kabat-Zinn's conception of wholeness diverges significantly from traditional epistemological frameworks and the concepts of *brahman* or *ātman* as articulated in *Advaita Vedānta*. Unlike *Advaita Vedānta*, which deeply explores the nature of ultimate reality and the self through rigorous self-inquiry, Kabat-Zinn's approach to awareness does not engage with these epistemological considerations. Instead, his concept of awareness is situated at the intersection of metacognition and a state that he characterizes as choiceless awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). This positioning may challenge contemporary definitions of metacognition and broaden its conventional boundaries.

Although Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness meditation shares some similarities with the concept of *vastu tantram* in *Advaita Vedānta*, particularly in its non-striving nature and emphasis on present-moment awareness, it remains distinctly secular. Unlike the *Advaita Vedānta* practices of *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, which rely on scriptural teachings and the guidance of a guru, mindfulness meditation as presented by Kabat-Zinn does not engage with scriptural texts or authoritative

spiritual teachings. Instead, it focuses on accessible, practical techniques that are devoid of religious or scriptural contexts, reinforcing its secular orientation.

Secular mindfulness practices, as developed by Kabat-Zinn, are notably stripped of the religious and ascetic elements traditionally associated with *Yoga*, *Advaita Vedānta* and Buddhist systems, which were originally designed for individuals such as monks, nuns, or ascetics. Rather than focusing on the dispassion towards the world typical of these spiritual paths, Kabat-Zinn adapted mindfulness practices for clinical use, targeting individuals suffering from chronic pain and stress. This shift reflects a significant departure from traditional practices, making mindfulness more accessible to the general public.

The convergence and divergence between secular mindfulness and Vedic systems highlight Kabat-Zinn's innovative genius. His approach transformed mindfulness into a self-help tool, a method for brain training, and a clinical intervention (Crane, 2017). While Kabat-Zinn acknowledges the influence of *Advaita Vedānta* teachers such as Ramana Maharishi and Nisargadatta Maharaj, it remains unclear whether he deeply engaged with the intricacies of *Advaita Vedānta* or *Yoga* systems, despite his contact with figures like Swami Chinmayananda. As Kathirasan & Rai (2023) suggest, Kabat-Zinn's primary influences for his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program included *Advaita Vedānta*, *Hatha Yoga*, Zen Buddhism, and the bare attention tradition of *Vipassana*.

Kabat-Zinn's ability to blend these four systems into a cohesive framework was facilitated by several factors. First, Davis (2010) demonstrated similarities between *Advaita Vedānta* and Zen Buddhism, which likely made their integration smoother. Second, the doctrine-free approach of the bare attention tradition in *Vipassana* aligned well with Kabat-Zinn's secular outlook, allowing it to seamlessly fit into his mindfulness cocktail. Additionally, the existing connection between *Hatha Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* would have minimized any potential conflicts in combining these practices. Finally, *Hatha Yoga*, known for its psychosomatic conditioning practices, provided a body-positive approach to healing, balancing the traditionally world-renouncing attitudes inherent in the other three systems with a more holistic view of health and well-being.

Given that Kabat-Zinn's primary concern was the practical application of mindfulness to alleviate distress and promote healing, rather than engaging in scholarly or exegetical analysis of religious philosophy, this pragmatic focus likely made it easier for him to

innovate MBSR. His emphasis was on the clinical efficacy of mindfulness techniques rather than their doctrinal foundations, which may also explain why the program was initially known as the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (SRRP), with no explicit mention of mindfulness in its title.

## 10. Conclusion

Secular Mindfulness, as developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, exhibits notable similarities to the philosophical and practical teachings found in the Vedic traditions, especially the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Yoga* systems. The underlying philosophy of secular mindfulness and its approach to alleviating suffering align more closely with the objectives of *Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* than with those of early Buddhism.

Kabat-Zinn's secular mindfulness may have been influenced, even if unconsciously, by the Vedic traditions, partly due to the prominence of *Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* in America during the 1960s. This influence is significant, suggesting that secular mindfulness is more deeply indebted to *Advaita Vedānta* and modern *Yoga* systems than has been widely acknowledged or recognized.

Kabat-Zinn's endeavour to secularize mindfulness has established him as a visionary innovator, bringing significant relief to individuals experiencing distress worldwide, all while operating without any commercial gain. This achievement is particularly notable given that ongoing research continues to validate the effectiveness of his approach, reinforcing its benefits day by day. Kabat-Zinn's work stands as a remarkable testament to the profound impact of adapting ancient practices for contemporary applications, offering substantial help to those in need while maintaining a focus on genuine, accessible support.

## 11. Future Research

A more in-depth examination of the philosophical foundations, the concept of meditation as a non-striving practice, mindfulness techniques, and their Vedic influences is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of *Yoga* and *Advaita Vedānta* on secular mindfulness. Additionally, focused research could explore how Jon Kabat-Zinn innovated and adapted these Vedic systems, revealing the specific ways in which his secular mindfulness practices were influenced by and transformed traditional Vedic concepts. Furthermore, there is a need for comparative studies that explore the similarities and differences between secular mindfulness and both Zen Buddhism

and early Buddhist traditions, areas that have been largely overlooked in existing research.

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