

# 1

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019



### What is Mindfulness? A Critical Religious Studies Approach

Podcast with **Ville Husgafvel** (15 April 2019).

Interviewed by **Chris Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/what-is-mindfulness-a-critical-religious-studies-approach/>

**Chris Cotter** (CC): *Anyone who spends any time on line or on social media these days, hasn't managed to avoid adverts for different mindfulness applications and mindfulness courses that one can go on. Mindfulness seems to be a buzz-word in all manner of business and economics, but also throughout various religious groups and religion-related groups. But what on earth is mindfulness? Is it religious? Is it secular? Is it connected to Buddhism in some way? What are its Buddhist origins? Why does it matter? Someone who's much better equipped to answer these questions than I am is [Ville Husgafvel](#) of the University of Helsinki. I hope I pronounced that approximately right. I had it a moment ago! Now, he's a PhD student here in Study of Religions with research interests in contemporary mindfulness practices, Buddhist meditation, Buddhist modernism, and so on. And he's also spent a year working at [SOAS](#), University of London, working there on his dissertation topic. He's got a number of publications in the area on Buddhism in Finland and one in *Temenos the Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, entitled "[On the Buddhist Roots of Contemporary Nonreligious Mindfulness Practice: moving beyond sectarian and essentialist approaches](#)." And we'll link to that on the website. And he's also got a forthcoming manuscript on "[The 'Universal Dharma Foundation' of Mindfulness- Based Stress Reduction](#)", so he clearly knows his stuff. He's enthusiastic about his topic. So, first off, Ville – welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

**Ville Husgafvel** (VH): Thank you very much, Chris.

**CC**: *Thank you for joining me. So, big questions. We've got a lot to discuss here. But just for anyone –*

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## 2

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

*whether they've seen those adverts for mindfulness apps or whether they've not seen them – what, broadly, are we talking about? Just in a few sentences, what is mindfulness? Then we can dive into the analysis.*

**VH:** Well, that is a question worth a dissertation of its own! But, in short, mindfulness cannot be grasped unless it's tied to some specific context. Because it's a broad abstract category. And it has its roots in the Buddhist tradition, in the really earliest layer of texts. You can discuss mindfulness as part of the noble eightfold path leading to the cessation of suffering, and right mindfulness is one part of that path. But the descriptions of mindfulness are varied. It can be discussed and defined in very specific ways as “keeping in mind”: keeping in mind the object of meditation; or in a broad way, keeping in mind certain Buddhist perspectives on things; and, more broadly, it can be just clear, lucid awareness of things – being alert. But since the Seventies – especially after the Nineties – it has become part of the medical, therapeutic or psychological vocabulary also. And here, many Buddhist connotations are left aside. And it's more about, you would say, self-regulation of attention and with an attitude of acceptance towards the present moment experience. So if you look at psychological studies and discussions that would be the definition. But within Buddhism there are various interpretations, depending on the tradition and the viewpoints, within the massive family of traditions known as Buddhism.

**CC:** *And I'm sure we'll get into some of that over the next half an hour. But, this incredibly broad topic – what drew you to it? I mean, you're doing your PhD study on it, so you must be interested. But why? How did you get to this point?*

**VH:** Well, many strands. One is a personal interest in meditation for decades already. And the other is scholarly interest. During my BA and MA studies I was always interested in the concept of religion and the interplay between Buddhist traditions and Western culture: how the Western concept of religion, for example, changed in the encounters with Buddhist traditions - and also how Buddhism changed in the exchange with Western philosophies and natural sciences (5:00). And so the influences have gone both ways. But then again, when I was thinking about the PhD topic I wanted it to have relevance in the society we live in. So I saw that when these mindfulness-based practices, mindfulness-based programmes, which are increasingly being used in the mainstream medicine, healthcare, education, corporate worlds, I saw that there would be discussion of the links to Buddhism. And I was seeing that, especially in Finland with a strong history in evangelical Christianity, there would be some prejudice on practices based on Buddhism and Buddhist mediation. And a lot of

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# 3

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

discussion which is not necessarily based on research, but on opinions and very superficial knowledge of things. So I was wondering: maybe a scholar of religion could provide some facts for the discussion?

**CC:** Excellent. So there are a lot of questions that we could ask here, and we'll probably get to some of them now. Is mindfulness secular? Is it cultural appropriation? Is it religious? Is it Buddhist? What kind of Buddhist? Which form of mindfulness are we talking about? Who is saying what? Why does it matter? So hopefully we'll get to some of those questions. But it would be good, before we get there, if we could talk about the how questions. So you've been interested in this broad topic and some of these questions, but how have you gone about doing that research? I know that in your articles, certainly, you've been looking at a specific form of mindfulness, so you might want to tell us about the individual lineage there, and sort-of what are your sources? And things like that?

**VH:** Yes. Thanks. Well it's really important, because the field of mindfulness practices is vast. It goes from traditional Buddhist practices up to some military interventions where mindfulness practices are used to train soldiers.

**CC:** Yes, I've heard that.

**VH:** So the question of which mindfulness you are talking about is very important, in order to say anything relevant on the topic. So I was interested in the interplay between how Buddhist practices are interpreted and decontextualized in Western therapeutic secular settings. And, in this process, one particular mindfulness-based programme, called [Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction](#), (MBSR) is a bridge builder. It's the first mindfulness-based programme to be introduced in Western secular settings. In a hospital, Massachusetts University Hospital stress reduction clinic, was the place at the end of the Seventies. And it was based on the work of [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) who developed the programme, based on his extensive practice in various Buddhist traditions and reading. But he was also a scientist and a PhD from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in molecular biology. So he was able to translate certain Buddhist perspectives and practices in a language that could be introduced in a hospital setting. And so this programme called Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction is my focus. And I'm interested from two viewpoints. One is a textual study of Jon Kabat-Zinn's work, the person who developed it: how he describes the practice, and its Buddhist roots; and what kind of Buddhist elements can be found there; and how he describes his own practice history – which traditions were relevant. But then, I'm also interested in the lived practice: how MBSR is taught in Finland. And I did

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## 4

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

ethnographic fieldwork in an MBSR teacher training course for one year, participating with them, and meeting and recording discussion with the teachers. So I want to see, also, what's the difference between a textual representation of the practice and what is actually happening in the field? And then, during the research process, I also had a chance to do an interview with Jon Kabat-Zinn to ask some personal questions and to go beyond the stuff that's written in the books (10:00). So it was really, really valuable. And so it gave me a lot of insight for the research.

*CC: Yes. So it sounds like you've got a lot to go on. So let's dive in to some of those questions the, so I've got one of my undergrad students, Immy, is working on a dissertation on mindfulness at the moment. And she was asking, "Can contemporary mindfulness be considered simply a form of Buddhist modernism?" She said? So, is it simply a modernised form of Buddhist practice, or what's going on? And what would we even mean by "Buddhist" in that context? Maybe you can use that as a springboard into some of your research.*

**VH:** Yes. Really interesting question, and it goes right into the heart of things. So if you try to do any comparison between Buddhist mindfulness and contemporary mindfulness, the first question is: which Buddhism are we talking about, in the variety of traditions approaches, interpretations? Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Vajrayāna, and geographical areal areas? And there's also one very important distinction between traditionalistic interpretations of doctrine and practice and then modernistic interpretations. In short, Buddhist modernism is an interplay . . . how Buddhism starts to change. How Buddhist traditions, and particular Buddhist teachers, started to reform Buddhist teachings and practices in an interplay with Western philosophy, with colonial powers, Christian missionaries. And they somehow formed a view of Buddhism which was able to argue for being compatible with scientific rational thought. But at the same time, provide meaning that was seen as the field for religion at the time. And this discourse has continued, until our days. There's still, often, many more positive views on Buddhism, even if religions in general are seen as somehow in a negative light. And in this rationalisation of Buddhist doctrine, many Buddhist teachings were interpreted in the light of psychology instead of cosmology or metaphysics. And so it's definitely a strand, an ongoing process, which has both occurred in Asia and the West. And if you look at the tradition that Jon Kabat-Zinn practised in, they are very much modernised versions of Buddhism. So he practised in the [Insight Meditation Society](#), which is a society teaching Theravāda-based [vipassanā](#) meditation, based especially on certain Burmese meditation lineages. And then also had a personal practice with a [Korean Zen teacher](#) and was influenced by many publications by many modern Buddhist teachers. So

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## 5

**Podcast Transcript**

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

I think the Buddhism which influenced these modern mindfulness-based practices was a very modernised version of Buddhism. And within these practices, the rationalisation and the scientific evidence of efficacy just went even, like, much further. So, in a way, it's the same process which was somehow continuing the process of Buddhist modernism. But whether it's relevant to call them Buddhist any more is a matter of much debate. Because there is no Buddhist self-identity any more. Not only in the programmes, but in the majority of the practitioners. And no Buddhist author of these refers to (Buddhism as) a legitimisation of the practices. The legitimacy is based on the scientific research, on the efficacy of certain meditation practices. So there's no straight-forward answer.

*CC: Clearly. It might be helpful just to take us through, perhaps just some of the practices and the sort of philosophies associated with mindfulness-based stress reduction. Just to give a flavour of exactly what might be involved. But also if you can maybe relate this to where those can be traced to historically, whilst you're doing it, perhaps?*

**VH:** Well, I'll try to keep it short!

*CC: Yes, just a couple of examples.*

**VH:** Being very short, MBSR and most of the mindfulness-based practice programmes which are derived from MBSR are taught as eight week courses (**15:00**). And the main components are certain sitting meditation practices starting with awareness of your breath, awareness of body sensation, awareness of sounds and thought processes, and these kind-of open awareness practices of being alert to the present moment, experiencing all its varieties. But also, certain body scan meditations where you scan different . . . keeping the present-moment focus on different body parts and going through, systematically, all the body areas. And then certain simple yoga movements with the same kind of present-moment accepting, non-judgemental, attention. But also certain aspects or informal practices that . . . Trying to become more aware of the automatic relations that you have in everyday life, on encountering people during your work life, in your free time and your social life. And also, paying attention to what kind of reactions are linked to agreeable situations and those which are not so agreeable. And observing the automatic responses and tendencies, and trying to become aware of those. And then, slowly, perhaps also understanding which ones are maybe useful, and pragmatic and which might be not so functional and perhaps creating unnecessary distress in various situations. So that's the basic practice, in short. And the elements are found in many Buddhist meditative traditions. The same focus on pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations; what kind of reactions do we have?

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## 6

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

And how our conditioned reactions maybe harmful or not harmful, and conducive to friendliness and compassion or to hatred, greed, ignorance. And these kind of perspectives are found both in Buddhist contexts and these contemporary mindfulness contexts. So there's a lot of shared ground. And some argue that the shared ground goes only as far as these psychological processes are involved. But if you look a bit deeper into the books, into the discussions, there are also what I would call “ontological” elements, which are not necessarily in any contradiction with our so-called physical, natural scientific views. But seeing human beings as part of a larger whole, a larger social whole, a larger ecological whole and also part of a larger universe. And this kind of realisation might have a profound impact on your self-identity, and also on your ethical behaviour: understanding that my wellbeing might be very much connected to the wellbeing of my nearest and dearest but also my work communities and also the ecological side of . . . . It's quite obvious that we like fresh air and clean water and not the other way around. So the meditation practice may, for some, have more ethical, ontological sides to it and it can be more apart of self-identity. I would use the word, “existential” practice. But for others it may be only a way to come to terms with chronic pain, or migraine, or, after knee surgery, how to deal with the constant pain. And that's the function of meditation practice. So it's this sort-of wide variety. And depending on the interpretation, some interpretations might come more close to Buddhist or existential or spiritual or

*CC: All of these things!*

**VH:** And for some it's clearly a medical, therapeutic practice, and that's the end of it. So I'm very cautious of giving any fixed labels on mindfulness practices. And that's one finding and something that I want to bring to discussions always, when there's a discussion on mindfulness practices (20:00). It's not a unitary phenomenon. It's not monolithic.

*CC: So, just sticking with the Buddhist interpretation, or seeing as . . . . It seems to be the case that the predominant interpretation has been that it's come directly through Theravāda Buddhism. And you would challenge that, wouldn't you? Why is there that interpretation that it's largely a Theravāda practice?*

**VH:** That's one more specific finding, and a topic I discuss in both of my articles. That there's a dominant narrative that contemporary mindfulness practices are mainly based on Theravada Buddhist vipassanā practices and, especially in their modern form, linked to particular Burmese vipassanā traditions dating back to [Ledi Sayadaw](#), [U ba Khin](#), [SN Goenka](#) or the lineage of [Mahāsi Sayadaw](#) and his students. And these are the lineages were very influential for the Insight Meditation Society

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## 7

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

teachers: [Joseph Goldstein](#), [Jack Kornfield](#) from whom Kabat-Zinn learned meditation. But these interpretations neglected that Kabat-Zinn was also a Zen student in training for years. And was very much influenced by Mahayana Buddhist ideas. And why is this important? If we pick certain Buddhist sources, texts, modern teachers and if we compare those texts and teachings to contemporary forms of mindfulness, it's easy to create a picture where they seem very separate – the objectives of practice and the forms of practice. And so you can easily make an argument that contemporary mindfulness is anything but Buddhist. It can be the antithesis of Buddhism, by picking up certain sources. But if you pick on other sources, the image is very different. And the practices are much more connected and continuous. And especially if you pick sources from Mahayana Zen and modernised interpretations of Zen practice, as in the Book of [Shunryū Suzuki](#), *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* which Kabat-Zinn often refers to. Or the practice of [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) a famous Vietnamese peace activist, poet and mindfulness teacher. So this is quite important, which traditions actually were relevant in the formation of mindfulness, if we want to do any comparison on the continuity of ideas and practices. So this is my argument that we need to look more at the Mahayana sources.

**CC:** *Absolutely. So just thinking – I mean I know this, maybe, isn't exactly relevant to the research that you've been doing, but in many contexts there've been debates, they have these debates about, is this a religious practice? Is this a secular practice? And I know you would very much, as a critical scholar, want to come down on a line of: it depends who's being asked and what's a stake and why they want it to be what it is. But can you, maybe, tell us about some of those debates that have happened? Maybe specific instances where people have been arguing that it clearly is Buddhist, or that it clearly is just spiritual, or that it's clearly secular, and maybe give us some examples of those public debates?*

**VH:** Well, the basic outline. It's a narrative that in contemporary mindfulness programmes meditation is taught independently of Buddhism or Buddhist religiosity - and what does it mean to be independent from that? That's a question. And in many scientific studies focussing on the effects of meditation practice and mindfulness practice, it's usually taken for granted that these are secular practices which may have Buddhist roots, (25:00) or roots in Asian Wisdom Traditions or something else, but don't have any philosophical or ethical connections to those practices, or the beliefs of those traditions. So it's a very instrumental, technical view of meditation. It's about self-regulation and certain attitudes. And of course, this kind of framing opens the doors to bring meditation into the mainstream: into public healthcare, into public education, into schools, in corporate contexts where Buddhist meditation would never be appropriate. But then again, if you look at the contents and the techniques, there's

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## 8

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

much more from Buddhist traditions than only some particular techniques. So some have argued that it's not possible to do a clear-cut separation of taking only the meditation and leaving everything else aside. And the discussion is very much similar to the debates around yoga, and the use of yoga. And there's been, in the US, [court cases](#) deciding whether particular yoga programme is appropriate to be used in public schools. And these similar kind of questions are raised in relation to mindfulness-based programmes. Even though so far they never went into court, yet. But there are scholars . . . usually the same scholars who argue that yoga should be seen in a religious light and that the public school is not the place for yoga programmes, usually mindfulness is seen in the same way. And it's obvious because they share many things in common and it's sometimes very difficult to do any clear-cut separation between meditation practice, mindfulness practice and yoga practice. But so some argue for clear religious elements which would close the door; that it's not appropriate for public contexts. But the majority voice is that they are secular in this way that it's appropriate to teach in public context. But many scholars recently questioned these both as very simplistic. Rather they say that these could be seen as both secular practices and hybrid practices which people can interpret within religious frames, Buddhist frames or secular frames. And it can never be determined on the level of whether a mindfulness practice is this or that. We must look into the individual mindfulness-based programmes. And even within certain mindfulness-based programmes we need to see how a certain individual frames the meditation practice. Then we can say something meaningful, whether it is Buddhist, religious, secular or what. So of course, in the general way, usually the journalist asks and people want very simple clear-cut answers, whether or not. . . . And the scholar says: "Well, if you look from this point it appears Buddhist, if you look from another point it appears secular." And so it's not an easy question to answer.

**CC:** *Exactly. But it's a fascinating sort of test case for just demonstrating all of those issues around that religious/ secular binary. And hopefully it can help undercut that binary and, you know, we won't be saying it is that or it is that. But there are so many other practices, that maybe are more familiar in the West, that are more connected to, let's say, Christianity, that traditional Westerners would be quite happy to say "Oh that's nothing to do with religion." But it's when this strange exotic, "other" thing comes in that decoupling, or acknowledging that fluidity and it being two things at the same time, seems to become quite problematic for people.*

**VH:** Yes. I often say that we have this conception or matrix of systems of classification. And when we encounter things that doesn't fit then we must change the system of classification. And in the same

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## 9

**Podcast Transcript**

Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

way that Buddhist tradition, when it was first encountered in the colonial period and by the early Orientalist scholars, it changed the way religion was seen (30:00). And I think now what's happening is that there are many other related movements and practices in this therapeutic, spiritual, self-help, self-improvement field that don't really fit into the clear-cut classification of secular/ religious. And there's often this . . . it's not clear-cut whether it's spiritual, post-secular . . . something which is very vague and very problematic also. Because it doesn't say much about the things that we observe. And I think, as you said, mindfulness practice is a very good test ground for building hypotheses, and improving our terminology and concepts relating to this new empirical data that appears in current cultural milieux.

*CC: Absolutely. So just as a final question, I mean, you've been telling us a lot about the research that you've been doing. What's next for you? And, maybe, what are some of the future directions that you see mindfulness research in general going in? Like are there some big areas where research is needed or you'd like to see research? Or where you would like to do it?*

**VH:** Well, I think there's still a handful in doing the dissertation itself! So right now, in my own research I'm going deeper into the ethnographic material. So far I've only focused on Buddhist texts and the texts of Jon Kabat-Zinn and mindfulness manuals and source books. So now I'm focusing on my ethnographic fieldwork material and looking how MBSR and mindfulness is taught in Finland and how future MBSR teachers are instructed to become teachers: what elements are emphasised, and what elements are possibly left out? So I hope, in the future, there will be much more ethnographic focus. Because the texts can tell us only so much. And what's happening in the field is nuanced. And I personally hope to have a possibility, after the dissertation, to work on interviewing on individual meditation practices, within both Buddhist communities and in modern contemporary mindfulness communities, and shed light on the variety of interpretation and frames in which meditation can be useful and meaningful for individuals.

*CC: Fantastic. Yes it could well be that the discourses might be quite similar, yet the objects populating the discourses are the differences. We shall see. Thank you so much, Ville for joining us on the Religious Studies Project.*

**VH:** Thank you so much, Chris. It's been a pleasure.

# 10

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Version 1.1, 7 April 2019

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