

# **Mindfulness as a booming, diverse and (non) religious phenomenon**

## **- mapping and analyzing mindfulness in the city of Aarhus**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mindfulness has become a phenomenon with widespread appeal in many Western countries. Like yoga, it has an Eastern religious origin, but through a long history it has been transformed and adapted to new cultural and social contexts. While the majority of research on mindfulness has been conducted within the health sciences, the aim of this article is to investigate the distribution, meaning and function of this practice through quantitative mapping and qualitative interviews with 16 mindfulness providers in the city of Aarhus in Denmark. The analysis reveals not just a booming phenomenon, but also a field characterized by diversity in terms of authority claims, motivations and uses. The discussion focuses on whether mindfulness can be seen as a religious practice or as a typical expression of an individualized and secularized technique.

### **Introduction**

Mindfulness has become a concept and a practice that is booming both in the health field and in popular culture. Google's *n-gram* shows a significant increase from 1990 in the number of (English) books whose titles include the term "mindfulness".<sup>1</sup> The Web of Science shows a similar trend, leading to a total of 4,653 scientific articles in 2015. Today hundreds of scientific articles on the subject are written every year, and a psychological journal with the title *Mindfulness* solely focusing on this practice came out in 2010. Mindfulness has become a billion-dollar industry and part of the symbolic capital of the white middle and upper classes, and it has been on the front cover of Time Magazine (in 2014 with the headline *The Mindful Revolution*) and in most women's and lifestyle magazines. Mindfulness was mentioned in 827 Danish media articles and features from 2000 to 2010 but more than ten times as many in the period from 2011 to 2016,<sup>2</sup> and 60 % of the 140 books in Danish about mindful or mindfulness were published from 2012 to 2015, most of which are related to spiritual self-development and (secular) wellbeing. It was part of the manifesto of a new Danish political party (Alternativet), and recently the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) produced a report (based on courses for Westminster parliamentarians) recommending mindfulness in various public domains.<sup>3</sup> The global relevance is reflected in the fact that it has the same name in most languages, and that it is also returning to Asian cultures as simply 'mindfulness' in a version that has been transformed in the West.

The vast majority of scientific articles and books on mindfulness are written from a health perspective. Does mindfulness *work*, and if so, how?<sup>4</sup> Buddhologists and historians of religion have written about mindfulness as Buddhist practice and on its transformation from East to West.<sup>5</sup> But there are few articles and books within the general study of religion that investigate mindfulness as a contemporary, social and cultural phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there are still questions that may be asked to get a different angle on this interesting phenomenon. How widespread is it? What is the motivation of providers and users for participating in this practice? What does it mean? Is it understood as a religious or spiritual practice, or solely as a clinical technique? Who offers it, and what kind of authority do they claim to have in order to do so? And more broadly, can an empirical investigation involving mapping and interviews suggest new interpretations of the concept and practice in a secular Scandinavian context?<sup>7</sup> Before describing methods and analyzing the field, a theoretical and historical introduction to the concept and practice will frame the overall project.

### **From religious practice to secular technique – a transformative journey from East to West**

The original (Buddhist) Pali word that translates to mindfulness is *sati*. The concept can be translated as ‘vigilance’ or ‘awareness’ and as ‘proper attention’ (*samma-sati*), the seventh of the Buddhist Eightfold Path towards salvation and the final nirvana, as described in *Sati Patthana Sutta*. *Sati* is a specific form of meditation, especially associated with insight (*vipassana*), which together with concentration (*samatha*) is a unique Buddhist meditation form. As a concrete technique, mindfulness is also part of a transformative treatment practice in a traditional Buddhist sense, a practice that seeks to overcome the fundamental suffering that early Buddhism sees as the focus of the doctrine, which already in classical writing was expressed by a medical metaphor. ‘The doctor’ Buddha could therefore find that there is disease (suffering), that it has a cause (desire, attachment), that there is a cure for it (nirvana), and even that there may be a prescription to help this cure (the Eightfold Path, including mindfulness).

The detachment from the religious monastic practice with which we are familiar in contemporary Western mindfulness is the result of a long historical process. In Asia, monks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century embarked on reforming Buddhism to accommodate it to modern times. Such ‘Protestant Buddhism’ (as Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, called it) was demythologized, rationalized and spiritualized, and both intellectual study and experiential practice became democratized, catering to the urban elite. In Burma and Sri Lanka several monasteries in the cities gradually opened up to the laity, so that they could participate in meditation, and later meditation centers were established where monks came to teach this practice. S.N. Goenka (1924-2013) was a

particularly important lay figure who helped to internationalize *vipassana* meditation as a non-sectarian technique, unrelated to the monasteries. His courses and retreats spread from Burma and India to other centers in Asia and the West, and many Americans were particularly interested in and inspired by this technique. A ‘*vipassana* movement’ finally took form with names like Jack Kornfield (1945-), Sharon Salzberg (1952-) and Joseph Goldstein (1944-) and their successors. Many of these early American mindfulness teachers were highly trained (typically within psychology), and most often closely related to Buddhist groups. Especially since the release of the book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* in 1976, the Vietnamese Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-) has been one of the prominent Buddhist monks who have acted as a global authority in the field, popularizing the English term ‘mindfulness’. Both in his main center in France (Plum Village) and the 357 American branches of the Community of Mindful Living, he and others have held courses and retreats, especially for Westerners interested in this practice and communal way of life. Since the 1980s the *vipassana* movement in the West has had some influence mainly among Buddhists, while claiming at the same time that *vipassana* is not Buddhism but a ‘universal technique’. Buddhist-inspired meditation has also found its way into New Age environments and even into the ‘new spirituality’, where meditation has been further individualized and psychologized and even made into a science. The scientification of Buddhism (or ‘the Buddhification of science’) is also a perspective that the project Mind and Life has worked for, with the Dalai Lama, Tibetan monks and neuroscientists carrying out experiments into and analysis of the relevance of mindfulness.

But the real secularization of *vipassana* into modern mindfulness should be attributed to a single person: Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn was and is a Buddhist with roots in both Theravada (and thus *vipassana* meditation) and Zen Buddhism (as a student of Thich Nhat Hanh and Philip Kapleau).<sup>8</sup> In 1979 he founded the University of Massachusetts’ program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) “as one of a possibly infinite number of skilful means for bringing the dharma into mainstream settings” (Kabat-Zinn “Some reflections”, 281). He believed that meditation was also relevant for domains outside of the religious and spiritual fields, a practice from which people could benefit as a ‘way of being’. With numerous publications, experiments and training, the Western psychological mindfulness propounded by him and his many colleagues eventually came into being as a tradition. Since 1979, over 20,000 patients have undergone one of the 740 worldwide programs, in which eight-week courses with the theory and practice of meditation have been part of the training. Kabat-Zinn’s book *Full Catastrophe Living* from 1990 has been the

curriculum for most MBSR instructors and has long since found its way to the bookstore shelves. Kabat-Zinn himself has achieved almost guru status among his followers.

The mindfulness wave is related to a general ‘brain turn’ of psychology, where neuroscience and cognitive therapy have helped to analyze the potentials of the plastic brain, often accompanied by researchers with sympathy for Buddhist ‘neuro-dharma’. Many studies have shown that mindfulness has positive results in the treatment of stress, anxiety and depression, and mindfulness has been used as a practice in schools, hospitals, prisons, the armed forces and business life. Since the 1990s other mindfulness training and ‘lineages’ (with Mindfulness-Based-Cognitive-Therapy (MBCT) being the best known) have followed this development. In Denmark, psychologists and mindfulness instructors have made various research collaborations, and in 2013 such projects were institutionalized by the Danish Center for Mindfulness at Aarhus University.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike conventional problem-focused coping strategy, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are based on developing an ‘accepting awareness’. Being ‘in the moment’ and ‘conscious presence’ have become the mantras of mindfulness. The popularization of positive psychology plays a role in supplementing psychology’s therapeutic role with a self-development potential, sometimes coupled with ideals and practices aiming at spiritual transformation and happiness optimization. Some ministers in the Danish Lutheran Church have also taken up mindfulness in Sunday services, and *In the Master’s Light (I Mesterens Lys)* has even designed a special Christian perspective with the term ‘Christfulness’. Mindfulness is today no longer just a concept and a practice of psychology and clinical science, but also part of the broader market. Popular books within the self-development genre often relate mindfulness to Buddhism directly or implicitly, but there are various types of user and various types of provider who are not necessarily Buddhist, spiritual or religious.<sup>10</sup> “Today mindfulness is touted as a cutting edge technique said to provide everything from financial success to mind-blowing female orgasms” (Wilson, ch. 1, 3). Discussions and verbal battles of opinion in the media (including the Danish media) about its scientific value or its relevance in public domains demonstrate that mindfulness has left the world of academia and arrived in the media.

Buddhist monasteries’ meditation practice is the basis of, but today also very different from, modern mindfulness. The concept and form of practice has travelled 2,000 years from East to West and undergone a transformation from a Buddhist elite ritual to Buddhist lay practice, to non-Buddhist meditation, and finally to a secular technique, being a global “transcultural mindfulness” (Plank *Mindfulness*, 20). Mindfulness was originally part of a religious system, aimed at ‘curing’

existential and cosmological disorder. Today mindfulness is both a method of treatment to overcome disease (a movement from ‘negative to zero’) and a method for optimizing the joy of life (a movement from ‘zero to plus’). Just as the term’s original meaning is debated, there is also no consensus about its meaning today. The concept has been transmitted in space and time and in different fields, with differently ascribed meanings and functions. In this sense, one can say that no one owns (the authority to define and use) mindfulness (Plank *Mindfulness*; Eklöf). The object of the remaining part of the article is to analyze such interpretations, ideas and functions in a concrete defined area (Aarhus) from the perspective of mindfulness instructors.

## **Methods**

The aim of this project was firstly to explore and map the dissemination and diversity of mindfulness among providers in Aarhus, and secondly to analyze understandings, functions and authority ascriptions of the practice. Empirical data was gathered as part of a graduate course on contemporary religion. Eight students were engaged in defining methods for gathering data and in developing criteria for categorizations and typologization. They worked in pairs, and the whole team met at least once a week for three months during the spring of 2015. They were all asked also to participate at least once in a mindfulness session, and to write (in Danish) chapters and case stories based on interviews.<sup>11</sup>

Two methods were used to gather data for analysis. Firstly, a mapping of mindfulness providers in Aarhus through internet homepages, and secondly interviews with 16 mindfulness instructors. After a pilot study of search possibilities and search engines, search criteria were defined and Google used to identify mindfulness (spelled both ‘mindfulness’ and ‘mindfulness’) in Aarhus (also spelled ‘Århus’) within the geographical compass of nine postal codes. All homepages that had been active within the last year were investigated to check whether they actually provided mindfulness (instead of merely using the concept). *Place* rather than *person* was the determining unit, which means that some persons may appear several times if they are engaged in different corporations. A previous investigation from 2011 (Gottfredsen) was used as the basis of comparison, making it possible to analyze quantitative differences. After identifying the mindfulness providers, they were categorized according to predetermined topics. Apart from knowledge about their level of mindfulness training, we were interested in knowing about how the practice was explained (categorized into ‘non-religious’, ‘scientific’, ‘Buddhist’, ‘other’ or ‘not stated’), the user segments (private and/or corporations), if it was a primary or a secondary practice (with other services such as

therapy, yoga, healing etc.), and which type of mindfulness was provided. For the last point we differentiated between “therapy” (a healing process ‘from minus to zero’) and “self-development” (‘from zero to plus’), inspired by Katarina Plank’s differentiation between the types ‘clinical’ and ‘life skill’ (Plank *Insikt*; “Mindfulness”, 46). Apart from singular characteristics, such data would also allow us to analyze correlations between types of services, segments, legitimization etc. Rather than aiming at finding representatives for the whole field (as documented in the quantitative survey), we selected 16 mindfulness instructors illustrating different types to investigate certain topics in depth (e.g. health, fitness, psychology, religion). Each instructor was interviewed by two students through a semi-structured interview guide made on the basis of the mapping survey.

## **Findings**

144 mindfulness providers were found in Aarhus, a significant increase of 74% in four years since a previous investigation (Gottfredsen 2014). Not surprisingly, the center of Aarhus had most results, followed by the high-income postal codes. 75% of the providers and 14 out of the 16 interviewees were women, which is not surprising compared to other countries.<sup>12</sup> Although ethnicity could not be measured in the internet mapping, the names appearing in the homepages as well as responses from the interviewees suggested that the majority of providers and users were ethnic Danes. This is also directly comparable to other studies, where the critique of the ‘white supremacy’ has been part of an American discussion of the ethnic particularity of mindfulness<sup>13</sup> (and Buddhism in the West in general).

More than half of the providers found on the internet did not legitimate their use of mindfulness specifically, whereas more than a third referred to science and research in the field as legitimate proof of the relevance of the practice. Only three percent referred to Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> Such numbers indicate a resonance either with a perceived recognition of mindfulness as a scientifically approved technique, or with a general widespread understanding of the concept that does not even need explanation or legitimization, perhaps also being related to the fact that few providers describe their educational backgrounds on the homepages. This is different from Gottfredsen’s analysis from 2011, where 65 out of 83 homepages mentioned the educational background of the providers in question, the most typical being psychologist or psychiatrist (Gottfredsen, 65). Such a difference could indicate a further appropriation of the practice and diversification of providers with a broader spectrum of educational background, several of whom have no interest in showing their (lack of) training in this field.

While the typical educational legitimization refers to psychology, physiotherapy and coaching, only 13 out of the 144 actually refer to a MBSR or MBCT training. The educational backgrounds of the interviewees were extremely varied. Apart from psychology and physiotherapy, teaching, yoga teaching, social education, IT, economics, theology and diplomacy were all given as educational backgrounds, typically because mindfulness was a practice combined with other professions. Most of the interviewees, however, stress the fact that they have taken a specific mindfulness training (half of them MBSR or MBCT), either in the US or in European countries (including Denmark).<sup>15</sup> Only four individuals had no mindfulness training at all, which they explained as being due to financial challenges and the fact that some of the training courses in question did not correspond to their own understanding of the practice. On the other hand, several of the interviewees with an MBSR or MBCT training voiced concern about the lack of legitimate authority, or even suggested that some providers used the MBSR/MBCT blueprint without having ever received it. Neither of these two training courses is protected – mindfulness is not a patented term – and anyone can legitimately call themselves a ‘mindfulness instructor’.

Apart from educational and institutional authority, personal experience is also an important authority factor. While Jon Kabat-Zinn is the main source of inspiration, names such as Mark Williams, Saki Santorelli, Thich Nhat Hanh, Ken Wilber or local Danish authorities have also been influential motivation factors for personal development in this field. Some have experience of other kinds of meditation, and your own mindfulness practice is considered a crucial gateway to your own teaching qualifications, not least when acquired through a tested system.

“It is good to know that what we are doing here is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, because everyone knows what it is”.

(Woman, psychologist and part of the research team at the Danish Center for Mindfulness at Aarhus University)

The main motivation factor for everyone is that ‘mindfulness works’.

“It was fantastic to see how it worked to be quiet and breathe [...] That there is so much evidence-based research behind it is enough for me, and I can feel myself that it works”.

(Woman, partly trained in MBSR, MBCT and Mindful Self-Compassion)

Another provider stressed that the scientific aspect was a safe basis:

“I wouldn’t dare to do it [provide mindfulness that was not based on scientific evidence], because so much is at stake when working with other people. I have a great security in the program, and the fact that I am trained (in MBCT). I know what to do the first, second etc. time of meeting”

(Woman, trained nurse and therapist, MBCT-trained)

The interviews thus correlated with the findings from the internet mapping in suggesting that the scientific authority of the practice was that it was a technique that ‘works’.

Several instructors also mentioned that one of the motivational factors was the *demand* for mindfulness. This market orientation is also revealed in the mapping survey, where only 30 providers had mindfulness as a primary service, whereas 114 providers used it in combination with other services, for instance psychologists and therapists who used it as part of their therapeutic services. The people who provide only mindfulness are *typically* MBSR/MBCT-trained, but they too regard mindfulness as one service among others. Mindfulness is generally offered in courses and consultations, and less typically in lectures and retreats, with any such courses being provided by instructors who have taken an MBSR/MBCT training themselves.

What type of mindfulness is offered? Distinguishing between “therapy” and “self-development” was one way to categorize the many homepage profiles into ideal types. Among the 144 identified providers, 86 (60%) could be characterized in the “self-development” type, and 41 (29%) in the “therapy” type, while 17 (12%) were in between, offering services across both types. Those offering mindfulness as a therapy all had a scientific legitimization or did not use any legitimization at all. The interviews also showed that those with an MBSR/MBCT training cater primarily for people needing therapy, typically as a treatment for depression, angst, stress, chronic pain or life crises. Some are referred to mindfulness courses by their doctor, hospital or social worker. Those without the MBSR/MBCT training are more broadly oriented, and their clients often have a good fund of psychological resources in their search for lifestyle changes, typically using other services that the provider offers. In this sense, owing to its popularity, mindfulness might be a gateway for providers to cater for a broader market including their other services. There is thus a broad distinction between MBSR/MBCT-trained individuals who primarily offer therapy, and all other instructors who primarily offer self-development.<sup>16</sup>

101 of the mindfulness providers found through the internet catered primarily to individuals, and 12 more directly to companies. Having mindfulness as a soft kind of meditation to be used as relaxation or mental fitness has also become part of corporate culture, and public institutions were also found among those using such courses, typically hospitals and educational

institutions. We also looked for possible connections to new religious movements and Buddhist groups<sup>17</sup>, all identified through previous investigations made by the Center for Contemporary Religion at Aarhus University.<sup>18</sup> Only one of the Buddhist groups had explicit teaching about and instruction in mindfulness,<sup>19</sup> one of the instructors also being one of the interviewees. His approach to the practice is naturally more explicitly Buddhist, as a “way of being” including “love, kindness and compassion”. We did not, however, find any mindfulness connection amongst any of the 20 new religious movements, nor is mindfulness typically represented in New Age environments.<sup>20</sup>

But is mindfulness not religion at all? The Buddhist interviewee sees mindfulness as part of a more holistic way involving a “deeper use”, distinguishing between what he calls a Western “a la carte” approach and a Buddhist approach, the latter being a religious tradition. Some define themselves as what could be called “culture Christians”, having been brought up in a Christian tradition but without seeing a relation between this and mindfulness. Another case representative of clerical Christianity was a former priest of the Danish Lutheran Church, now serving as what she called a “freelance priest” and consultant. To her, the relation does make sense, since she can use Buddhist life philosophy in her own “Christfulness”, claiming also that “Jesus could have taught the same”. All interviewees recognize the Buddhist origin, but either see Buddhism not as a religion (but as a “way of life”) or consider mindfulness to be a secular technique. Participants can be spiritual seekers too, but as one explained: “people can be seekers, but we just don’t bring it [spirituality] into that space”.

Both instructors and their participants (based on interviewees’ evaluation) also felt that the quality of mindfulness resided in the fact that it is a very simple technique with some breathing and relaxation exercises but no other rituals and no doctrinal background necessary. One instructor, having tried several other meditation techniques, said she had experienced a sense of “coming home” after having participated herself in a mindfulness workshop with a Buddhist group. Some also provide the practice in a concrete instrumental way for losing weight and acquiring a healthier lifestyle, not unlike the use of yoga for bodily and mental fitness. As one instructor explained:

“It [mindfulness] teaches each of us to get in contact with the body during eating, to feel individual needs, to distinguish between physical and mental hunger, and to taste food as it really tastes”.

(Woman, mindfulness instructor, coach and director of a center for diet and lifestyle)

Gottfredsen concluded her 2011 analysis by saying that mindfulness is “not exclusively Buddhism, it can be spirituality and it can be an a-religious technique; but mindfulness can also be a mixture of

two or three of these categories” (71-72). The present investigation subscribes to the same overall result, which will be further elaborated in the conclusive discussion below.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

The purpose of the survey was to map the prevalence of mindfulness in Aarhus and to analyze aspects of how mindfulness is used, understood and legitimized by providers of the practice – as well as finding out who these providers are. Following a survey of the internet and interviews of 16 mindfulness providers, the following conclusions and perspectives can be presented.

### *1) Mindfulness boom – mindfulness is a growing phenomenon*

With 144 mindfulness providers identified in Aarhus in 2015, there has been a 74% increase in only four years. The figures do not in themselves indicate how many mindfulness practitioners there are, but such a significant increase in services at websites at least shows that there appears to be quite a high demand for mindfulness, both in the private sector, and to a lesser extent also in business and in the public sphere. Three quarters of the providers on the web are women, and all but one of the interviewees were women. Except for one provider, the field is also, as is the case throughout the Western world, almost mono-ethnic, and both the survey and the interviews indicate that mindfulness is primarily offered in areas with a high income. The boom in Aarhus is probably not unique, but follows general trends of recent years’ dissemination of the practice in the West.<sup>21</sup>

### *2) Therapy, self-development, market – mindfulness is a diverse phenomenon*

There is quite a large diversity of the form, function, importance and authority of mindfulness. Typologically this pluralization can be characterized among the providers by a) *‘the clinician’* providing mindfulness as a purely scientific method and a treatment consisting solely of evidence-based programs in a therapeutic process *from minus to zero*, b) *‘the bricoleur’* integrating mindfulness as an additional product in a range of options being transferable to the provider’s other practice, worldview and commercial business *from zero to plus* and c) *‘the spiritual’* embedding as an integral part of a broader spiritual or religious worldview and personal development *from zero to plus*. Although not all providers have a professional training, scientific legitimization is an essential point for all. ‘It works’ is a mantra that supports evidence-based research, to which a third of the providers refer on their websites. More than half have not even seen a need for legitimization,

indicating an implied acceptance and propagation of the field. Among the 144 providers, only 30 offer mindfulness as a primary practice, while others combine it with for instance yoga, therapy, health improvement, weight loss or mental fitness. While almost one third use mindfulness as therapy, the rest use it in a self-development perspective. Mindfulness has thus entered the market, where to a large extent the consumer can also determine the content and function of the product on offer. The pluralization and marketization of mindfulness seems not to have reached its peak yet, since several providers claimed that demand is higher than supply.

### *3) Authority and authenticity – mindfulness is a practice with no owner*

Nobody has a patent on the concept or practice form of mindfulness, and no-one has the authority to define or legitimize it. There seems, however, to be a general dividing line between those who have taken MBSR/MBCT training and those who have not, the former being typically more ‘clinical’ with a focus on health and healing. Only 13 out of the 144 providers identified on the internet refer to having this educational background, and this group can also be said to represent a more elitist type of provider. Some see the necessity of having this training certified as a blueprint of authenticity, as a kind of institutionalization of a practice needing more structure and defined content. All mindfulness providers stress the importance of their own practice. This is a well-known connection found in classical Buddhism, but it is a more typical aspect of individualization in a modern Western world in which such an ‘experience paradigm’ is suitable. The dilemma of which means of authority should define authenticity is well-known in Western variants of Eastern traditions, where traditional authority based on lineage is often outmatched by the demand of individual, inner, authentic experiences. A dilemma between individualized authenticity and loyalty to tradition is thus typical not just of Buddhism in the West in general, but also of mindfulness discourses and environments.<sup>22</sup>

### *4) Secularization of religion or re-enchantment of the secular? Mindfulness between religion and non-religion*

According to both the internet data and the interviews, most providers do not place mindfulness within a religious domain. The practice might be acknowledged to be based on Buddhist teachings, but in its present form and function it has been stripped of religious elements, being a purely scientific technique not found among new religious movements or the New Age environment, and only practiced individually by ‘freelance priests’ outside or within a marginal sub-denomination of

the Danish Lutheran Church. Only one of the Buddhist groups has mindfulness courses, the instructor distinguishing between the original Buddhist tradition and its modern ‘a la carte’ version. As such, mindfulness represents a concrete example of secularization of a practice, being the end result of a 2,000-year historical transformation from an elite and monastic ritual in India to a scientific technique and a popular practice for the masses and the market in the West. In the West, mindfulness has largely been secularized and ‘de-buddhified’, and can thus be seen as a program of training and “de-spiritualization of asceticisms” (Sloterdijk, 61) which is suitable in contemporary (mainly Western) cultures where the imperative “You must change your life” (ibid.) is prevalent, not least through narratives from psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists. The practice of mindfulness in itself is simple and devoid of any inherent religious or spiritual content. Religious narratives can be applied, but the practice and experience is in itself ‘empty’. One way of explaining this is to acknowledge the fact that ‘mindfulness’ is a modern Western invention, created primarily by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who (along with his followers) insists on filtering the religious roots from the present therapeutic practice.

However, depending on how far one allows the concept of ‘religion’ to be stretched, mindfulness practice in some contexts is *also* embedded in religious practice. This is most explicitly seen when mindfulness is practiced in religious settings, such as Buddhist centers or Christian churches. The common argument that ‘Buddhism is not a religion’ and that meditation is purely a scientific technique would probably be challenged, if the practice was analyzed as a ritual or an expression of ‘religion of health’, or if the close relationship between spirituality and some fields of psychology (e.g., transpersonal, holistic, humanistic, positive psychology) were analyzed critically, making the religion/science distinction problematic from a study of religion perspective.<sup>23</sup> The affinity with religion is further suggested by the genealogical relations between individuals of different mindfulness lineages, several of which are directly inspired by or closely embedded in Buddhist practices and groups. MBSR/MBCT traditions might provide a ‘clinical’ and secular form of mindfulness, but personally Kabat-Zinn and many of his followers are Buddhists themselves, seeing mindfulness as a way of ‘universalizing the dharma’. Some of the interviewees of this project expressed Buddhist and/or religious inspiration at personal level,<sup>24</sup> and the fact that a majority of the providers offer mindfulness as self-development could indicate a further relation between mindfulness and religion. Although this is not within the scope of this project, it could be reasoned that professional providers and lay users understand and use mindfulness differently (as it is the case with yoga<sup>25</sup>), the former probably being more prone to ascribe more contextual (and

hence Buddhist) depth to the practice. It could thus also be speculated, as has been argued with regard to yoga (Henrichsen-Schrems & Versteeg), that there is a possible process from being curious about general health problems to becoming engaged in new self-awareness and finally in new spirituality or Buddhism. As such, as suggested by Plank about the role of (non-Buddhist) ‘mindfulness appropriators’ in forming the Buddhism reception in Sweden (Plank *Insikt*) mindfulness *may* (as suggested about alternative medicine in Denmark; Ahlin, 150 ff) be the gateway to increased spirituality and to a re-enchanting life world not only for providers, but also for users. In this perspective, mindfulness can just as realistically be placed at the ‘more’ end of the ‘more-or-less-religious’ spectrum as many other contemporary Eastern practices which have been Westernized.

This project was conducted in Aarhus, but there is no overarching argument to suggest that the results are not comparable to other Scandinavian cities as well. Similar mapping projects of this phenomenon would thus be highly relevant to contextualize this. On the other hand, comparative analysis could be a means of exploring possible cultural, societal or historical differences. This would also be related to the question of economy and market relations in general, the contexts of which also contribute to framing the questions of authority and legitimization, all of which are areas needing further research. Further research is also needed at user level. Both quantitative and qualitative investigations could help to explore the phenomenon, and a neutral and non-normative analysis through participant observation would be particularly valuable to interpret and contextualize mindfulness as a ritual practice. In a broader perspective, to supplement normative and/or health-oriented research, more research within the critical study of religion is needed to get a deeper comprehension of the practice, which is, after all, also a cultural and human phenomenon.

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[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mindfulness&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cmindfulness%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mindfulness&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmindfulness%3B%2Cc0)

<sup>2</sup> According to the Danish media database Infomedia, mindfulness (with the search word 'mindful\*') appeared from 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2000 to 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2010 161 times in national newspapers, 374 times in local newspapers, 289 times in magazines and 3 times in radio/TV features. In the period from 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2011 to 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2015 the numbers were respectively 1093, 2786, 2526 and 2840.

<sup>3</sup> [http://themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/Mindfulness-APPG-Report\\_Mindful-Nation-UK\\_Oct2015.pdf](http://themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/Mindfulness-APPG-Report_Mindful-Nation-UK_Oct2015.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Examples of health meta-studies are Fjordbak & Walach and Khoury et al.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this are seen in Sharf and the special issues of *Contemporary Buddhism* vol. 12,1 2011 and *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 61, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Plank *Insikt* and Plank *Mindfulness* are some of the few examples of such an approach.

<sup>7</sup> These were the questions we set out to investigate at a seminar for graduate students at the Department for the Study of Religion at Aarhus University. Eight students were taught the overall introductions about the history, phenomenology, transformation and importance of mindfulness, and a brief introduction to the theoretical background of relevance was given. The students were asked to develop and operationalize the method themselves as well as the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination of results. This article is thus based on an educational project in which Rikke Bach, Maibritt Braukmann, Sanne Andersen Hansen, Mille Vadstrup Holm, Heidi Fredsgaard Larsen, Ditte Bach Pode Poulsen, Carina Stobberup and Line Rohde Vestergaard were the actual project developers and the author of the article was the project manager. Thanks to sociologist of religion Lars Ahlin for his critical comments on this article.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Kapleau was an American Zen Buddhist missionary, known not least for his popularization of easy access to Buddhist enlightenment (*satori*).

<sup>9</sup> <http://mindfulness.au.dk>

<sup>10</sup> While some of the 140 Danish books about mindfulness (60 % of which were published from 2012 to 2015) are scientific, the majority are related to spiritual self-development and (secular) wellbeing, often written as guidebooks on how to live more 'mindfully' in different aspects of daily life. Only one is about classical Buddhist mindfulness, and some integrate Buddhism as part of a broader historical or philosophical perspective, but the majority either only mention Buddhism in passing or not at all.

<sup>11</sup> The whole research report with case stories can be seen (in Danish) at <http://samtidreligion.au.dk/oevrige-projekter/mindfulness-i-aarhus/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Today, women make up a very significant proportion of the teachers and authors spreading mindfulness in American culture, and quite likely represent an actual majority of the American practitioners of mindfulness" (Wilson, ch. 3, 23). In an investigation of yoga in Denmark it was shown that 90 % of the providers were women (Bjerrum and Pilgaard, 31).

<sup>13</sup> "Mindfulness must be rendered as 'white', that is, deracialized, blank, pure, available, and superior to the ethnic or tradition-bound" (Wilson ch. 3, 15). The 'whitening' of mindfulness is widespread in most Western media, and has also been discussed in Buddhist social media, especially since the front covers of *Time Magazine* and the Buddhist journals *Shambala Sun* and *Mindful* illustrating mindfulness by photos of cross-legged, young, middle-class, healthy, smiling white women.

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<sup>14</sup> Although not based exactly on the same criteria and estimates (which necessarily have to be done subjectively in each case), these numbers are parallel to the investigation made four years earlier by Gottfredsen, where she found no Buddhist, few spiritual and almost all homepages being characterised as ‘non-religious’ (63).

<sup>15</sup> While the quantitative mapping of providers could document educational background if this was actually stated on the homepages, it is plausible to assume that most people who had taken a MBSR/MBCT training would mention this, and the interviewees are thus probably not representative of the whole field.

<sup>16</sup> This correlates with the findings of Gottfredsen in 2011: she found all MBSR instructors to be in the ‘non-religious’ category (65).

<sup>17</sup> While some sociologists of religion categorize the ‘white’ Buddhist convert groups among new religious movements, they are categorized and identified here as Buddhists.

<sup>18</sup> Center for Contemporary Religion: <http://samtidreligion.au.dk/en/religion-in-denmark/>.

<sup>19</sup> One Buddhist group occasionally providing mindfulness is Øsal Ling. Another group, Karma Kadji Skolen, is known to be rather exclusive and ‘sectarian’, and rather than referring to mindfulness or general Buddhist meditation, their own Diamond Buddhist rituals are explained, also in presentations for the public about “meditation and consciousness in daily life”, with people being taught “to be aware of what actually happens and of being present 100% here and now” ([http://aarhus.buddha.dk/buddhisme\\_aarhus/foredrag/](http://aarhus.buddha.dk/buddhisme_aarhus/foredrag/)).

<sup>20</sup> To some extent, it might be reasonable to regard mindfulness as part of New Age or new spirituality, since much of its underlying philosophy (the world as more-or-less constructed by consciousness and psychological factors) and practice (realization of this through self-development, the use of meditation technique and positions), does indeed overlap with that of mindfulness. However, there is much New Age and new spirituality teaching and practice which does not directly correspond to the lived reality of mindfulness instructors (and possibly lay users), and observations from the last two years’ Body Mind Spirit fairs in Aarhus also testify that mindfulness and typical New Age environments do not overlap.

<sup>21</sup> Such significant increase is seen also in yoga practice. Whereas one percent of the Danish population practiced this in 1993, six percent did so in 2011 (Bjerrum and Pilgaard, 6).

<sup>22</sup> On this dilemma among Western Buddhists, see Waterhouse. On individualized mindfulness, see Shonin & Gordon. On the dilemma discussed within mindfulness circles, see Kabat-Zinn “Some reflections”.

<sup>23</sup> Perennialist ideas of wholeness with concrete techniques to “cure the pathology diagnosed by religion” towards a meaningful life (Payne 247) are also applicable to mindfulness contexts, where, as Plank has shown, the profane world of stress, negative thoughts, pain etc. is the reverse side of the sacred world of presence, self-knowledge, joy etc. (“Mindfulness”, 70ff). This is related to what Hornborg calls ‘religion of health’, being “a spiritual therapy, a hybridization of traditional religion and medical psychological jargon, offered to the de-traditionalized, but not fully secularized Swede” (121). On the critique of psychology in constructing and manufacturing ‘spirituality’, see Carrette and King.

<sup>24</sup> In a personal conversation, one of the influential instructors, who is also the leader of a mindfulness center, said that mindfulness is clearly Buddhist and her own approach to it was through Buddhism. In her courses she also talks about the Buddhist origin and puts the practice into a Buddhist theoretical context, but without identifying the two.

<sup>25</sup> An investigation of yoga in Denmark showed that yoga teachers to a much larger extent than the practitioners understood yoga as something religious or spiritual (Bjerrum and Pilgaard, 18).